

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
November 10, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: 1 John 2:7-14

Reflection: Old Letters, New Hope – Remembrance Sunday

When was the last time you got a letter in the mail? I'm not talking about computer-generated Christmas Epistles or bulk mailed donation letters. I'm not even including thank you notes or a few personalized thoughts scribbled at the bottom of your birthday card. When was the last time you got a real letter containing news you haven't heard before, from someone you care about as a way of staying in touch?

I would never down facebook posts or timely emails, snapchat streaks or newsy Christmas chronicles. These kinds of digital communication are amazing and they have been a real gift in helping us to stay in touch with friends far away, relatives in other generations. But I can't actually remember the last time I got a real letter in the mail.

Letters (snail mail) were once a way of life – it was the **only** way people kept in touch over the miles or the generations or the decades. The Bible (as ancient as it is) is full of letters – some of them are edited into the books of scripture, others stand alone as epistles. They were written by prophets and poets and Christian apostles – people of faith who sent each other news and theology and especially a reminder of God's love. Those letters embodied love.

In war time both ancient and modern, there was always great displacement. Local volunteers were sent overseas, medics and teachers transferred across country to serve empty schools and hospitals, war brides left their families for new lands. They couldn't Face time or Skype, they didn't email or "PM" each other. They wrote letters – to sweethearts and parents, to friends and communities. Their letters embodied love too.

Today we are going to hear two of those letters that were written in war time, and a poem written by the daughter of a soldier, many years later. And we close with an ancient letter, a Christian epistle. Those words will be woven together with some of Roberta and Peter's musical reflections. May we hear love embodied in all that we receive, and find new hope in them.

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**Excerpt from a letter to Borden Tupper –
from your Daddy (to be given when he is 12 years old)
JH Tupper died in France in 1916**

My dear Son;

How dear you are to me, you will never know how hard it is for me to leave you, perhaps never to return. You can never understand unless you go through the same ordeal yourself some day and I hope you never have to but if you do, face it boy, face it bravely. I love you with all the power of love within me and now on the eve of my departure for war I am writing you and if I do not come back this will help you to understand why I went, why I took such a risk, why it was necessary. I count my life cheap in the scale compared with the empire... Perhaps when you read this the war will be over and peace in the world once more.

It may be my lot to fall and not return with the troops and if so I would like you to always remember that I loved you better than life itself. I have looked forward to the time when you would be a little older and I would be helping you shape your future and give you a father's counsel and you would have the benefit of the years of experience I have had. We would be good friends, you and I, the best of friends. You are my oldest son and I hope you will grow up to be as good a man as you promise to be at present...

You can be true to your country by being a good citizen, one ever ready to defend what is right and oppose what is wrong. As you grow to manhood you will have to decide on many questions, public questions, and take one side or the other. It is your duty to do that. Decide honestly and then act accordingly... This is all included in citizenship of the right kind. It is not always necessary to die for your country to serve her. You can live for her, only do your duty as you see it and you will be fulfilling your obligations...

And now my own dear boy, I must close. I cannot express my love for you. May God keep you and watch over you, Your loving father.

Music: Memories of You

Reverend William Beattie was minister in the Presbyterian Church. He enlisted in September 1914 and sailed with the first contingent to France as the Chaplain to the First Canadian Brigade. On October 2, 1915, he wrote to the congregation at Coburg from France.

One of our Battalions had four men killed last week. Two of them died here in the village from wounds received in the trenches. The funeral was most unique. One was a R.C.; the other a Protestant. The R.C. Chaplain joined me and walked beside me ahead of the wagon in which lay the two lads stitched up in their grey blankets. Ahead of us the band marched playing the Dead March in Saul.

When we arrived at the church door the R.C. was taken into the church while we proceeded to the grave. While I was still reading the burial service the other body was brought up and lowered into the same grave while the Latin of the R.C. service mingled with the English of our service. There we stood, side by side, at the common grave, he sprinkled the holy water and I sprinkled the dust of Mother earth as in reverence we committed them to the grave, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The benediction pronounced, the bugles played the last post (lights out) and the band struck up, 'Abide With Me Fast Falls The Even- tide.'

We departed, leaving to their rest the brave warrior lads, who, companions in life, lay side by side in death. In a corner of a little Catholic Church Yard in far off France they lie waiting the bugle call that shall awake them to newness of life. ...

I then asked them to sing a song which I heard for the first time in England last winter - one which is a very great favorite with the boys here. Its chorus runs thus:

wonder how the old folks are at home,
wonder if they miss me while I roam,
wonder if they pray for the boy that went away
And left his dear old parents all alone.
hear the cattle lowing in the lane,

see again the fields of golden grain,
think I hear them sigh as they bade their boy good-bye
wonder how the old folks are at home.'

My dear people, pray for all the Chaplains and especially for me that I may be faithful to this
great trust. Your devoted minister, William

Music: As Time Goes By

Finding a Box of Family Letters, by Dana Gioia – 2016

The dead say little in their letters
They haven't said before.
We find no secrets, and yet
How different every sentence sounds
Heard across the years.

My father breaks my heart
Simply by being so young and handsome.
He's half my age, with jet black hair,
Look at him in his navy uniform grinning beside his dive bomber.

Come back Dad! I want to shout.
He says he misses all of us (though I haven't yet been born).
He writes from places I never knew he saw,
And everyone he mentions now is dead.

There is a large long photograph
A banquet sixty years ago.
My parents sit uncomfortably among tables of dark-suited strangers.
I wonder what song the band was playing,
Just out of frame, as the photographer
Arranged their smiles. A waltz? A foxtrot?
Get out there on the floor and dance! You don't have forever...

They never let us forget that the line
Between them and us is only temporary.
Get out there and dance! The letters shout,
Adding *Love always. Can't wait to get home!*
And soon we will be. *See you there.*