

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**July 7, 2024 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 16 (responsive)**  
**Luke 18:1-8**

**Sermon: Turning the Corner 1: Heritage**

When I was doing my Interim Ministry training, I had the privilege of working through the fieldwork phase with a nice variety of ministry folk. We were from various denominations, both conservative and progressive: we were male and female, some were new to ministry, others already retired or contemplating retirement, some came to ministry as a first career, others brought decades of experience in other work before starting this second career. What a blessing all those different voices and perspectives were.

The main work of the fieldwork component was to design a workshop or project, then all the classmates would pile on and say what they liked and didn't like – and if you think that ministers only say nice things, think again! And then you would go away and revise it, then present it somewhere, and come back and talk about the experience.

One of my colleagues was doing a workshop exploring his congregation's Heritage – finding out what was unique about their history and what made them who they were today. He put a big white sheet down one wall of their meeting room, like the tablecloth paper we use, and he wrote a time line with a few general markers – church building opened, baby boom, a split that happened in their denomination, COVID...

The workshop he led gave people a chance to put up memories over those years. And they got all the usual markers – this was when a certain minister arrived; this was when we had enough money to hire a second minister; this was when the tree fell and we had to replace the roof.

All in all it was a good workshop and it gave him a good sense of what had shaped the congregation and what some of their strengths and vulnerabilities were.

When they were done, someone went over to the wall to take down the timeline, and my colleague – in a stroke of brilliance – said "No, leave it up there. Let's live with it for a few weeks and see if anyone has something to add."

Not long after, he was in the building when scouts were meeting. And one of the leaders, not a member of the congregation, took a look at the timeline and said: "Yeah, I remember that minister from the 80's. He preached a sermon about the virgin birth and my parents left the church and never came back."

My colleague invited him to put it on the time line. And then someone else came in and talked about how they were refused baptism for their children because they weren't

married. And someone else came in and remembered the Christmas Eve service in 1992 that was so beautiful they had many new families join...

So they had the official timeline, with all the historical notes, and then they had the human timeline – with all the blessings and the curses. From that timeline my colleague could see a pattern of conflicts that had usually been buried and were never really dealt with. He could see big blow ups both good and bad, but long-term they were never really understood as part of the congregation's heritage.

And as we know the conflicts that are never dealt with, just happen again and again. And the blessings seem random, instead of something we can access and build on. However, when they were on the timeline, alongside the official history, everyone could see the pattern start to emerge.

Heritage is the first task of an intentional interim ministry.

I've called this July sermon series "Turning the Corner" because we are now in that liminal space – quickly finding out that we can't look backward and forward at the same time.

According to Interim ministry models, there are actually 5 transition tasks, though I am only preaching on four – someone else can help RPUC with the fifth task, which is envisioning the future.

One of the misunderstandings about Interim Ministry is that it's all about the ministry person who is hired. As if the congregation gets to sit back and get some work done. That's a distortion of the reality – because interim ministry has to be done by congregation and paid ministry personnel together. With the retired supply ministry of Jim Baldwin and another part-time contract for transition goals, you are well served for the time ahead. If you have a congregation that is Intentional about transitioning well, sometimes the interim ministry goals are achieved, which allows for a better outcome overall.

I have often heard Rideau Parkers tell the story of what took place when Ott McKennit retired. He had been the heart and soul of RPUC for many years. Then Don Frame was hired – a new minister who would bring his own unique gifts and skills to this place. But before he could begin his call, unfortunately, his arrival was delayed by cancer treatment. In his place, Stan Parkhouse was hired to fill the gap until Don Frame could make the move.

I only knew Stan in his later years, through Ottawa Presbytery, but he was one of the most unflappable people I have ever met.

He may have not taken interim ministry training but he provided the kind of compassionate steady leadership that the congregation needed to move one from one pastoral relationship and to prepare for a very different style of ministry.

The congregation, of course, needed to be committed to that goal as well, to set their minds on maximizing that time of transition and to become a healthy place for new ministry to land and take root.

When I look at an imaginary time line for Rideau Park, I see all the usual historical markers – laying the cornerstone, upgrading the organ... I also see some less public stories of unexpected things that happened along the way. Overall, the theme that springs to mind for me is persistence. Persistence through global pandemics, through personnel crises, through conflicts over theology, sexuality, and church polity. Rideau Park has been through all kinds of death and resurrection, always continuing to be followers of Christ in the very best way possible, regardless of the conditions in that present moment.

After one blow up, I remember one member of the congregation saying to me, I just don't know which side I'm supposed to take. And I said to them "Just keep being the church, that's the best you can do."

Jesus painted a picture of persistence for his followers, telling them the story of a poor widow, a woman with no standing in society, and no power to choose her own outcome. She suffered a great injustice, but she did not back down.

Her lack of status did not overcome her. She was persistent in her quest for redemption. The local judge wasn't known for having much compassion anyways. But the widow kept after him. And even though "he never gave her the time of day", she did not stop persisting and making her cause known – you can envision her pounding on his gate and waking up the whole household. Him sticking his head out a window, still in his nightcap, shouting "Go away or I'll call the soldiers." But still she persisted.

Well, the final outcome was that he gave in. In Eugene Petersen's *The Message* the judge says: "I care nothing what God thinks, even less what the people think. But because this woman won't stop badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice. Otherwise I'm going to end up black and blue from all this pounding."

I don't remember anyone ending up black and blue in Rideau Park's timeline – but I do remember hearing time and again about how the congregation has faced what seemed like insurmountable challenges. Through persistence and prayer, however, Rideau Park was able to turn into the transition and find new life.

When we hear the word "persistence", our mind's eye probably goes to slogging through some mess with great effort, all dogged determination without much joy. Kristopher Phan Coffman\* comments about this image of persistence in the story of faith, however, and he asked: *I sometimes wonder: what if there's another persistence, a persistence that is rooted in something other than monotony?* Then he discovered an image from the Indigenous translation of the gospel: *So, keep **dancing** your prayers, and the way will open before you.*\*\*\*

This is a great image from the indigenous people who do a lot of dancing in prayer and ceremony. But it's also a great image for us, if you've ever had an evening on the dance floor and you're ready to sit down and take a breather. But don't you know it, that's just when they play your favourite song, and then you are back up there, grooving like you aren't even tired.

That's the kind of persistence God calls us to practice. Not because we feel guilty or because the bible tells us so, but because love draws us back out on dance floor and joy keeps our toes tapping and inspiration recharges our batteries.

That is the kind of heritage at Rideau Park that will empower the next chapter to emerge in a healthy way. Yes, there have been hard times. Yes, there has been conflict. Yes, we could always use more resources. And yes there may be times of chaos and confusion ahead.

But over and over again, Rideau Park has always chosen the way of compassion over competition, the way of openness over putting up walls, the way of faith over fearfulness.

*Coffman also says: One of the things that sets dancing apart is the way that the music and the people that you dance with can sweep you into a flow that keeps you going far longer than you thought possible. Instead of repetition, there is variation of movement and beat, and, most importantly, the energy that you draw from the people around you...What a joyous persistence that could be; instead of counting the minutes until our labour ends, we might instead realize that persistence itself constitutes the rhythm of the Christian life.*

I am lucky that Rideau Park is not the Baptist church that my mother grew up in, where all kinds of dancing were frowned upon – even mentioning it in a sermon would be a bit risqué. I have heard about lots of dancing in the heritage here, and I foresee even more dancing to come.

Because the truth at the foundation of every congregation is that it is not just **our** persistence that creates and nurtures the community of faith. If you imagine that God is the widow in Jesus' parable, then we go forward believing that God is truly persistent, even pulling us back on the dance floor when we are ready to give up. We might as well keep dancing too, because God is about to play our favourite song.

Thanks be to God for the invitation, Amen

[\\*Persistently Dancing for Hours - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

\*\* *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*, 2021 Rain Ministries.