

## **“We Can Never Control How our Efforts are Appreciated, or even Remembered”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church  
on May 13, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Easter 7)  
also known as Mother's Day or Christian Family Sunday  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 1 (VU #724)  
John 17:6-19  
(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

One of the greatest painters of the modern era in terms of the value of his extant paintings sold exactly one painting during his lifetime, for the equivalent of \$109 in current funds.

In his day, he was seen as an eccentric person with no idea of colour and perspective, but after his death over 2,000 pieces of his art were discovered that are valued in the mega-millions today. So is the lot of Vincent van Gogh.

Julia Margaret Cameron is a British photographer who greatly influenced modern photographic technique through her style of closely cropped portraits of people – some ordinary, interesting people she met on the street or who sought out her services. Due to her connections she also took photographs of some of the most famous people of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Darwin, and Robert Browning among them. Her work, however, was not widely acclaimed until after the Second World War, well after her own death in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her photography now is valued for its rich perspective and sensitive portraiture. Her works have been on tour throughout the world to immense interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Franz Kafka is seen today as one of the most influential existential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Robert Funk wrote a book entitled “Jesus as Precursor” where he suggests the parables of Jesus are a precursor to the teachings and writings of people such as Kafka, offering a rich and unexpected way of unravelling a story. Kafka died in 1924 from tuberculosis, as the disease left him unable to eat. He asked his friend Max Brod to burn all of his writings when he died, but Brod did not listen to him. He got Kafka's works published, even novels and collections of stories that were incomplete at the time of Kafka's death, and the rest is history.

We have no reason to believe that Jesus ever wrote anything. He did not have a cache of sermons or poems or stories or novels left behind to be discovered. He did not create a body of art work, and most certainly did not have a hidden collection of photographs. He did not arrange for the disciples to burn his musings or his creations before he died on the cross. As far as we know, he did not write a book or anything like a book.

But Jesus did a lot of teaching. And John in his gospel records the essence of his summary teachings in the middle four chapters of John, John 14-17.

Today's passage from John is the culmination of those reflections, and what Jesus offers in these words is a promise that God loves those to whom Jesus spoke as much as he loved Jesus, and his teachings were not shared to have an impact on only a short time in history, but were to be valued for the long haul.

Today is known as Mother's Day or Christian Family Sunday, and we can do a lot worse in mapping our life course than setting out to arrange the important lessons we have learned within our family circumstances.

Even people who have come from broken and dysfunctional families have learned a lot of important lessons from their family by reflecting on and discerning how they came into the circumstances that surrounded them. Many have built lives of meaning and purpose by making sure they do not repeat the mistakes of the past in which they were raised.

And those of us fortunate to have excellent role models and stable home environments, as Catherine and I shared in the time up front, have a basis to understand the entreaties of Jesus as to how we should live our lives with respect and concern for others, as God would have us live.

Her name is not Ann Landers, and she did not spend most of her life advising complete strangers, but for nine years Emily Yoffe wrote a column entitled "Dear Prudence" as she offered insights to those who wrote to her for her personal thoughts. She was amazed that so many people would trust a complete stranger with such essential questions about life – "Should we have a third child or is it okay to have only two, even though before we married we did discuss having three children?" "Should I accept a job promotion that may mean I must travel more, or should I stay close to home while our children are young?" "How can I suggest that my husband's mother visit less often and stay for a shorter period of time since I feel she is trying to control my life and my family?"

Basic questions that people often need to address but questions that seem unusual to leave with a complete stranger.

Yoffe said that there are recurring themes – relatives who are controlling, husbands who are lazy, and wedding parties that acted crazily, especially the brides.

I did not make these up – these came in the letters and emails sent over the course of the nine years.

But scientists in Quebec have suggested they may have a source of that behaviour – why people are prone to seek advice from strangers as to what to do.

For some humans, uncertainty leads to anxiety and poor performance. While wild animals, when they face danger and uncertainty, often become more heightened in their awareness and alert in their demeanour, some humans become rattled and afraid when uncertainty arises.

I have a theory that this is one of the reasons that people ignore elections such as the one we are currently facing in Ontario, and soon to face within municipalities across the province. People ignore elections, close their ears and even refuse to vote for they fear the uncertainty of the process, and when unsure as to what to do, they do nothing.

This may be the only time I refer to the upcoming election, and all I want to say is that it is irresponsible of us as citizens to do nothing. You may be like me, and be unsure as to how you will vote, or even how you should vote, but doing nothing is not an option. We need to

face our uncertainties and make an informed and personal decision. It is needed within our society and for our own personal well-being – we should not refuse to act.

A research team at the University of Quebec came up with a way of measuring that human feeling around uncertainty – they call it the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS), and suggest that for those of us with a higher level of intolerance and uncertainty, we may develop various anxiety disorders as a result of that predisposition that is part of our character make-up.

Now how does one deal with it? Well, if one finds himself or herself very anxious when faced with uncertainty, it is wise to engage in activities and vocations that have a great deal of predictability and regularity. That is one way to get control over the uncertainty in one's life. The other thing to do is surround one's self with friends that are reliable, and who do not create many surprises, or fail to support you when you need it.

But primarily, what this Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale speaks to is the power of Jesus' statements at the end of the sections in John's gospel shared today.

This passage speaks to a very basic human need, though not identified as such, where we need to know that what we do is appreciated, honoured, and of value to those around us.

We rarely know what impact we have on people. Yet if only we could hear a small portion of the ways that we have made an impact on the lives of those around us, we would be encouraged to keep going.

A retired teacher held a wake for herself when she turned 80. She thought there was no point in wasting a good party at her death on others and not be a part of it, so she held her own wake before her death. And she said if anyone wants to say nice things about me I will let them, because I won't hear about them when I am dead.

It worked – she is now coming up to her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, and her friends wonder how they can top that event. I suggested to one friend who remarked about the milestone birthday about to unfold that if we simply took time to offer thanks and praise to people on a daily or weekly basis, then such milestone birthdays and events would lose their value, because the value would be lived more regularly and more fully throughout the year. So don't wait to see how this 85<sup>th</sup> birthday will be celebrated – celebrate her life (and the birthdays of others close to you) on a regular basis.

Jesus says each one to whom I spoke is as special in God's eyes as Jesus is in the eyes of God.

You are that special. You need not be buried in anxiety due to ultimate uncertainty, for God does have a plan and a way forward for you.

Not sure? Then let me help you experience that reality. If Jesus were physically present he would offer warm applause to thank you for who you are. So invite you in spirit or in body to give yourself an ovation – raise up your hands and applaud yourself for being the special creature of God that you are.

I hope your anxiety about life has been lessened, and your worry about the future subsides, as you hear clearly that God in Jesus Christ is in your corner, each and every day. AMEN