

“Every Once in a While We Must Return to Basics”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: I Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-22

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Every activity has its basics that must be attended to. It is difficult to be a creative writer unless you know how language works, have a basic understanding of sentence structure and linguistic norms, and can communicate in a way that people understand and to which they are willing to respond.

Duane Gibson is a Canadian rapper who probably is better known across the pond in England and especially Holland or Germany than here in Canada (where Drake, who was a young rapper starting out when Duane had begun to establish his career, is the face of Canadian rap music today). But Duane has spoken eloquently on the value of education and the importance of learning language skills in order to be able to ply his trade as a rapper.

Gibson once held the World Record for the longest free-rapping session without stopping, and says his ability to be a rapper is bolstered by the fact he is an English major from a Canadian University, and for a time taught school. One needs to develop the basics in order to succeed.

I once heard a piano teacher speak about a concert her students held, and she always performed one piece at each concert because, as she said to me, “I really do not like performing – I much prefer to teach. But if I can perform and encourage my students, then I let them know I expect nothing more from them than I expect from myself.”

One year she picked a piece that turned out to be much more difficult than she at first thought, and it demanded a fair bit of rehearsal time on her part. The piece had many arpeggios of ascending and descending chords played like a scale, and she told a student who asked her how she could play such a piece: “I could do it because of all the years I practiced different chords and the fingering to play them – that allowed me to know how to approach this difficult piece because I had done the basic preparation. I knew what the notes were in these different chords. I did not have to think about them.”

Athletes need to be reminded of the basics – whether it is “keep your stick on the ice” when trying to deflect a shot near the net in hockey to “bend your knees” when trying to field a groundball in the infield in baseball.

In any activity there is a time to be reminded of the basics.

I have become a much more animated driver in recent times as I remind other drivers of the basics. I do not think they listen to me (in winter, they probably do not even hear me) but lessons I learned from my father as a former truck driver I am glad to repeat – basic lessons such as “put your turn signal on before you get to the intersection to let people know what you are planning; do not signal you are turning left after the light turns green;” or “respect truck drivers and they will respect you – do not cut off a large truck on passing it because the driver with a rig cannot react as quickly as a car can, and contrariwise, if a

trucker passes you, flash your lights to let them back into your lane so the passing lane is freed for others.”

And there are basics of the faith that at time need to be uplifted.

The two passages read today speak about basics. The passage from Corinthians speaks about the basic focus of faith. It is not about what team you are on, or with whom you associate, but how you live your faith shared with others.

Corinthians is one of the first appearances of the concept that is common today, and against which Paul railed: It is more significant “WHO” you know rather than “WHAT” you know.

Paul criticized people who lined up beyond certain leaders, as if the faith was built on the person who led you, rather than the one who shared the faith in the first place: Jesus.

It is an important passage for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for the focus is not on which person we follow (“I follow Pope Francis,” “I follow Martin Luther,” “I follow John Knox,” “I follow Menno Simons,” “I follow Charles and John Wesley,” “I follower Moderator Cantwell,”) but the focus is: “What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ?”

Taking such words and putting a label of a denomination helps us no more. We live in an age where denominational identity means as little as it has in any time in the history of the church, and I think that is a good thing. It is not “who” you are, but “whose” you are.

And the Matthew passage is an emphasis on making sure that Jesus’ life is to focus on finding the light of insight and hope for the future, and not be buried by times of disappointment and uncertainty.

There is a danger in being buried by our surroundings when life goes against us, and we cannot see what light there is in our life in such moments.

Jeff Goins in a blog post has suggested that there is nothing particularly wrong with realizing that it is not always what you know but who you know that makes the difference. That simply means that we must develop interactions with others, build on relationships with people we meet, and not be a hermit from the world.

While we seem to see many instant stars in the music industry, it takes (on average) over a year of building a relationship between an artist and a singer before he/she is signed by a recording company. Accomplishing one’s goals and meetings one’s aspirations take time.

That may be why the struggle for understanding and communicating hope as a world-wide Christian community was not instantaneous. After 500 years of the reformation we have events throughout the world with Catholics and Protestants gathering this fall – no one more significant than the two-day conference to be held in Sudbury with leadership from all Christian faiths.

What we know is important – how we live our faith and apply the principles that Jesus taught. But who we know also is significant. We need to be in relationship with the people around us to be aware of needs lived, and choices determined, and challenges to be faced.

One of the basics of the faith is faith gives us a clearer connection to God, and a clearer connection to God allows us to have a clearer connection with others.

That is a basic that is worth repeating.