ROOTED IN FAITH, ON THE WINGS OF THE SPIRIT

The roots of this and most congregations are well recorded in various history books that have been prepared and preserved over the years.

Pictures, documents, artifacts, minute books, membership rolls, financial statistics – and annual reports, which often published the annual offerings from each individual – all tell the stories of the early beginnings and the ongoing life of witness and faith of the people who have called South Kinloss Presbyterian Church “home” over the last 169 years.

This church didn’t “just happen” here.

It was a serious matter of conscience arising in the hearts and minds of early settlers from Scotland whose faith was firmly rooted within them – and they wanted a place where they could hold regular Sunday worship services.

One of the driving forces behind the beginnings of this congregation was Murdoch MacKenzie – who learned that a tavern was proposed for this location. He and some of the “church fathers” pooled their resources and collected enough funds to pay the initial 10 percent down-payment of $15.00 – which, in the mid 1850’s was a hefty sum of money.

“Two men walked through the dense woods to Southampton, a distance of over 50 miles each way, to register their claim to the lot.”

One does not do that on a whim.

One does that because one is dedicated to the cause.

One does that because one is rooted in faith, and prepared to be raised up on the wings of the Spirit and be led into a new future.

The roots of this congregation go deeply into the bedrock of the Church of Scotland and the worship practises of the Reformed tradition – worship that honours the glory of God – worship that is Scripture based, in the name of Christ, and inspired by the Spirit.

This congregation has been led in worship and served by the leadership of seventeen different clergy in its 169 year history – (Glen Noble, Bill Munshaw) sixteen of them being men – which was the only option until 1966 when the Presbyterian Church in Canada – after years of prayerful debate, discussion and dissention - eventually opened the doors for women to be ordained as clergy and elders.

It would be 23 years before this congregation called its first – and only - woman minister – the Rev. Peggy Kinsman.

That’s not to suggest that there was necessarily intransigence on the part of the congregation; it very well may have been that the best-suited ministers during those years were men – but it’s worth noting.

The work of the Session has remained much the same over the years – providing pastoral leadership and oversight of the congregation – but one thing has changed dramatically – and that is the matter of an individual’s personal conduct being under scrutiny.

I read an account in your history book with great interest and some amusement.

*In those days it was a serious matter to join the church. Ministers spoke bluntly of what was right and wrong. A young man who played the violin occasionally at dances, had decided to join the church. Someone hinted to him that he would have to quit fiddling at dances. After serious thought, the young man chose to fiddle and forget the church.*

*Other young people with lesser offences than the fiddler felt they were unworthy to join the church. It was the church’s loss to not have many hard-working and faithful people in its ranks.*

*To have standing in the community, it was important to be a member of a congregation. South Kinloss session records of the day concentrated on admissions and admonitions of all manner of description to the church rolls.*

*Member conduct and church devotion had to be of the highest order…Admission to church membership required an examination of an applicants’ personal conduct….*

*One example states that in March of 1881, Angus MacKinnon and William MacKay were severely admonished by the session for holding separate and private Gaelic services in the Grey Ox School during the hours of public worship in the Big Church. They were chastised with a proclamation of the Kirk Session:*

*“It was agreed to cite these two elders before the Session…to answer to the following charges:*

1. *Absenting themselves from the oneship of God in this church.*
2. *For following divisive courses against the laws of the Church.*

*The two elders in question would not admit to their transgressions…and subsequently were removed from Session for a period of six months.*

I would imagine that members of today’s congregation AND the elders utter a sigh of relief that the responsibility of such scrutiny is no longer a matter of practise for Session.

The roots of this congregation are embedded not only in the bricks and mortar of this building – but far more importantly in the lives and the faith of the people who have found a home for their heart here at South Kinloss.

Many have been and are – died-in-the-wool Presbyterians through and through – but in more recent years particularly, denomination has played a lesser role in people’s determining which church they will attend.

Matters of doctrine and polity might still matter to some, but more important for many people is the warmth a person experiences and the welcome they receive – the music and the message during worship – the ways and means for them and their family to participate in the life of the congregation – the opportunity for making a difference in the community and the larger world with a group of like-minded people – the chance to spread their wings and fly where the Spirit of God will take them – the opportunity for them to deepen their faith as they engage in Bible study and discuss matters of faith – not to find the correct answer, but to be free to ask difficult questions and not be judged.

Over the years, the roots of faith and the wings of the Spirit have enabled this congregation to pursue the prophet Micah’s words to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God in so many ways.

The roots of faith have been firmly planted in children and young people who have grown up and moved from here to pursue their goals in education, the mission field, the social sciences, police services, music, business, or economics – but more important than their professions have been their lives lived in faithful service to God and others.

Names like Hugh MacMillan, Freda and Graham MacDonald, John Sandy MacDonald, and Alexander Nicholson, Andy Burgess, have all made their marks on the church and the world – and their roots were here – as are yours

 Their faith was nurtured here – as is yours.

The Spirit of Pentecost was upon them – as it is upon you.

Every moment of every day, the seeds of faith which are sown and taking root here, are blossoming in ways you will never know. The hungry are being fed; the thirsty are given a drink; the naked are clothed; the lonely are visited; the sick are being cared for; Why?

Because those who are administering the care came to, and continue to understand that this is what Jesus ask of his disciples – and this is what the Spirit enables them to do.

And they learned that here.

Here, they came to have a deeper understanding of what that means.

As the Spirit did in the beginning, so the Spirit continues to hover over creation and sweep over the face of the waters;

The Spirit continues to breathe new life into you, into all people who desire to do God’s will.

The Spirit continues to be poured out on you so that you can dream dreams and see visions of your future ministry here.

The wings of the Spirit will lift you up when you are discouraged.

The wings of the Spirit will enfold you when you are filled with doubt;

The wings of the Spirit will carry you into new relationships of reconciliation;

The wings of the Spirit are fanning the flames of justice and peace all around you – even when all evidence seems to suggest otherwise.

I am convinced that Dr. Martin Luther King was right when he said, “*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”*

For people of faith, it is our calling to embrace this truth, to believe it with every fibre of our being – and to allow the wings of the Spirit to lift our spirits, to expect tongues of fire to hover over our heads, inspiring and enabling us to speak bold words of peace and grace and reconciliation and justice – and to speak boldly in the language of love which is the universal language of all humanity.

For 169 years, South Kinloss Presbyterian Church has been a place of both roots and wings for hundreds and hundreds of people.

The legacy of those 169 years is evidenced in each one of you gathered here this morning.

Who knows what new roots will take hold in the years to come?

Who knows where the wings of the Spirit will yet take this congregation?

The sky’s the limit – and your future will be revealed as the seasons unfold.

Your future is something God alone can see at this point, but the seeds of your future are already planted in the garden of faith.

Your future is a hidden promise waiting to unfold, much like a butterfly waits to unfold its wings from within the cocoon.

And in the meantime, with your faith rooted firmly in Christ, I pray that the Spirit will continue to open your hearts to both the joys and pains of living, and that you will continue to be inspired to proclaim and live the gospel message of Christ’s abundant love – and that you will continue to extend a gracious welcome to all whom God will bring into this place and into your hearts and lives.

To God be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.