

Leaving a Legacy

A sermon on Psalm 127; Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 & Mark 12:38-44 by Roslyn Wright

I have had a Seniors Card for 12 months now, so you can work out I am over 60. The magic of the seniors card is half price public transport, discounts with various companies and organisations. Some of you will be aware that last month was Seniors Month and this often has some additional specials on offer. State Trustees made an offer they have lived to regret – free wills for Seniors. I went on line to register for an appointment to get my will reviewed. I received an email notifying me that an agent would be in contact within a day to make a time for my appointment. That was at the beginning of October. Last Saturday afternoon I was up in the hills near King Lake and I finally got a phone call from State Trustees. They apologised it had taken so long to call me, but apparently they had been overwhelmed by the numbers of people who took up their offer. We may be old but we ain't stupid. We know a bargain when we see one. So then it was a matter of making an time for my appointment. I was thinking something before Christmas would be good. But the earliest available time was in late January! So I have to keep healthy and avoid any stray buses until then! Do you have a will? Is it up to date?

It's time to review my will because not only has my main beneficiary died, but the shape of my assets has changed dramatically on the sale of my house in Newport and moving into an apartment in West Melbourne. Making the move was an exercise in downsizing and simplifying life. I went from a 5 bedroom house with 2 living areas and a garage that was 7 metres by 15 metres, to a one bedroom apartment with a storage cage of 2 metres by 1 metre. When Patrick died I had a lot of his stuff to sort through and clear out. Most of that huge garage was crap that he had gathered and did not want to let go while he was alive. I discovered that his idea of cleaning up his office had been to take out the drawers of his desk, tip the contents into a box and put the drawer back in the desk. And the box got added to the pile in the garage. I vowed that I would not leave a pile of junk for my daughters to sort through after my death. So downsizing was the moment that forced me to review my stuff. Sorting through everything, and I mean every single thing, I had to decide what could come with me, and what needed to be sold, recycled, given away. I was not going to hire a storage locker for what couldn't fit. Doing that was a review not just of my stuff, but of all my life. All my memorabilia, souvenirs, birthday cards, every lecture note I had taken, the 3000 books that Patrick and I accumulated in our library, clothes, tools even my pot plants – everything had to be reviewed, evaluated and processed somehow. I have lot less stuff now, and more space in my life, not just physically but mentally too. I know what my girls will have to deal with when it comes time to decide what to do with my stuff.

Working out what will happen with our stuff after our death is not something we give much thought to usually. We might have a will that mentions the big-ticket items, but all the little bits and pieces of a life are not usually included. And someone has to decide whether what was precious and necessary to us is just stuff to be disposed of somehow.

The readings for today got me thinking about legacy – what we have received and what we give to others. A lot of the time when talking about legacy we think about the material things we leave behind. At Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre where I work I know the Social work department are often involved in helping people get their wills in order, as well documents specifying power of attorney and advanced care plans. Important business that needs to be attended to when facing life limiting disease. But in the Spiritual Care Department where I

work, we deal with legacy in a different way. We have had a research project running where we take time to interview a person who knows they have less than 6 months live. We record the highlights of their life, what they want their family and friends to know about them, what has been important to them. It is not just the story of life, but the history of someone's values and beliefs, their emotional legacy. This is recorded, transcribed, and read back to the patient. They edit, add photos, and then it is printed up and given as a booklet for them to give to those they have chosen. They may choose to do that before they die, so that together they can share and celebrate their life with those they love. Or they may leave it with their will to be read after death. Some who have young children have written letters to be given to the children when they get to a significant milestone in life. These documents are a significant legacy, a gift of life lived. When talking with people about the impact of cancer I will ask how they want to spend their time now on the face of the changes they are experiencing. People talk about what is important to them, people they want to spend time with, things they want to do, jobs to finish off.

When Patrick was in the final months of his life one of his projects was to collate and publish a collection of his mother's writing – fiction and non-fiction. Part of his legacy to his family was to collect and honour her legacy, stories about their shared life as a family growing up in the 1950's and 60's. One of the things I kept in my big clean out was the bound 5 volume set of her works, something that represents not just her legacy but Patrick's too.

Towards the end of his life Patrick could no longer read. He couldn't concentrate on the text for more than a few sentences. So I offered to read to him. I read all of his mother's 7 novels to him, something he had never done, and he heard her voice through the words I read to him. But the first book I read was this – *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* by Henri Nouwen. It wasn't a new book for either of us, but at that time it was a significant gift to share in the reading together. It put into words between us so much that we knew but weren't saying to each other about his dying. It brought into the open an awareness that his dying, the way in which he faced his dying and helped others to face it too, his dying was a gift, a part of his legacy. He faced his death with courage and gratitude, gratitude for the gifts of life. He said repeatedly that he was dying in love. Dying in love, dying with love, dying into love. That is his legacy to me, showing me the ways in which love holds us all, the dying and the carers, at such a time.

Legacy is not just about death and dying and inheritances. It is not something that we receive or give at the end of life. Legacy is about what is happening now. Each day, each moment, in each interaction we are building our legacy, we are giving our legacy. How we live and how we die are interconnected. Live in love, and you will die in love. Live in fear, with regrets, live with anger, and chances are that those are the things that you carry as you die – fear, regrets, anger. The attitudes that we carry, the values we live by, the here and now of our life, this is what we are building and carrying with us.

So what is that like for you? How are you living? We have choices – not always about what is happening to us, but we do have a choice about how we will respond to what is happening. We can choose our attitude, our values, our actions in response to the circumstances of life. That's what Naomi and Ruth did, both widows and with no man to protect them. Naomi and Ruth chose a risky path. It took courage and grit to follow through. But the rewards in their lives, and the consequences for the nation of Israel were huge. And for us, as this is a story about the ancestral line that lead to Jesus. The Psalm for today points out the futility of

trying to build an inheritance for ourselves. It encourages us to look at what is important in life – slowing down and trusting God’s care, having good relationships, and investing in time and love. The poor widow in the gospel story did this too, living out her values, taking the risky path. Jesus tells us that she gave her all. She was the most generous giver. She lived with an open heart and an open hand. How beautiful that is. Hebrews tell us of the price that Jesus paid, the ultimate sacrifice. He lived true to his values, living out love and the power of love in all he did, living and dying.

Questions of legacy – What have you been given? And what are you doing with it? What is the legacy you have? What is the legacy you will leave? What is the legacy you live out of today? How are you living?

Time is limited for all of us, not just those facing a life limiting condition. So the invitation is to be conscious about that, and make the most of each moment, each day. Live into life and love the way you want it to be. Choose your responses to what happens, and live out those choices. Moses said to the people of Israel before they crossed into the promised land: ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days...’ (Deut 30:19-20).

You have choice. Live it out, because whatever you choose will live on after you.