

Sermon October 30, 2022 – Rev. Ron McConnell

It is certainly a joy for me to join with you in worship today, in person and online. My sincere thanks to the Board and congregation of McClure United Church for the honour of joining your two current Minister Emeriti, Dale Morrison and Joan Brown, as Minister Emeritus. It's also a gift for me to join today in worship leadership with McClure's serving minister, my friend and former teammate, Debra Berg. Thank you, Debra, for ... well, lots of things ... including your support in the Minister Emeritus and Voluntary Associate Minister process.

A while ago, I read an article in the June 29, 2022, issue of the Christian Century magazine. Written by editor and publisher Peter Marty, the article was entitled "Looking Ahead." I believe it both worthwhile and appropriate to share this article with you today. Peter Marty writes:

The windshield on my car is five feet by three feet in dimension. I know this because I measured it. The rearview mirror inside is 9 inches by 2 inches. There's a reason the windshield is 100 times larger than the mirror: cars are designed to be driven forward. Drivers benefit from having an optimal view of where they're headed.

It strikes me that a lot of people spend their days trying to steer their way through life by fixating on the rearview mirror. What's behind them in their own life's experience guides their navigational instincts. Instead of believing that God or anybody else might be beckoning them toward a new future, they're more focused on recovering the past. The orientation map they rely on keeps directing them backward rather than forward, which turns out to be a pretty difficult way to drive.

Rick and Meredith have grown apart in their marriage ever since their 26-year-old daughter died from complications of sepsis six years ago. I touch base with them about once a year, only to discover that nothing has changed about their situation. Meredith is pleasant, happy, and fulfilled. Years ago, a grief therapist helped her realize that, though she thinks of Katie on a daily basis, there's no better way to honor her daughter than to steer life purposely toward the newness in front of her.

Rick, on the other hand, refuses to seek any help for getting beyond his sorrow. He clings so desperately to the past that it all but paralyzes his present. He sits at home in a depressed state, slowly worsening in health. Nobody has yet been able to redirect his sight from the rearview mirror where he's determined to secure the memories of what was. A crash in this marriage seems imminent.

Plenty of other life circumstances have people fixating on their rearview mirror. For some, it may be their past health that now frustratingly eludes them. For others, it's that inability to let go of any possession with even the slightest memory attached.

One need not be amnesiac about the past. We live pretend lives if we don't let history and experience inform us. To paraphrase Soren Kierkegaard, life can only be understood backward, but it has to be lived forward. But how to treasure or accept our past without getting stuck in it – that seems to be the trick. Teaching ourselves to cull wisdom from what's behind us without allowing that past to dictate our future is our regular assignment. Anything less may well result in a crash.

I remember reading a number of years ago about a successful program in which seasoned farmers helped Iraq War veterans cope with their post-traumatic stress disorder. They did so by creating opportunities for hundreds of vets to live and work on farms in different locales. While PTSD used to have them falling asleep to the terror of past trauma, the demands of planting and harvesting vegetables now had them waking up to a future in front of them. Farming, which is all about the future, completely redirected the focus of their vision and the hope of their lives.

The longer we live, the more memories we see in our rear-view mirror. But that doesn't change the size of the mirror. We still need a big windshield in front of us to see what's ahead, which is where we'll spend the rest of our lives.

Today the people of McClure United Church are celebrating their congregation's 56th anniversary. Having served as one of McClure's ministers, from 1998 through 2017, I have my own memories of those nineteen McClure anniversaries that we celebrated together. For me, the highlight of them all was in 2016 when McClure celebrated its 50th Anniversary. That year, a small but very strong and committed planning committee had lots of great ideas and fantastic follow-through.

I would like to dwell more on some of the past McClure anniversary celebrations that I remember. But there are some words in Peter Marty's that keep me from doing that just now. Let me remind you of those words, and maybe I'll paraphrase them just a little....

It strikes me that a lot of *congregations* try to steer their way *forward* by fixating on the rearview mirror. What's behind them in their own *congregation's* experience guides their navigational instincts. Instead of believing that God or anybody else might be beckoning them toward a new future, they're more focused on recovering the past. The orientation map *these congregations rely on* keeps directing them backward rather than forward, which turns out to be a pretty difficult way to drive – *a pretty difficult way to serve God and God's people in the present and the future.*

Now, next Sunday, following worship, McClure United Church will be holding an important meeting to discuss the various challenges and opportunities before this congregation. When you meet, please be assured that I and many others who love this place and its people will be holding you – congregation, Board and committee members – in our hearts and our prayers.

Imagine! McClure is celebrating fifty-six years of faithful worship and service through constantly changing times. // To quote Peter Marty once more:

The longer we live, the more memories we see in our rearview mirror. But that doesn't change the size of the mirror. We still need a big windshield in front of us to see what's ahead, which is where we'll spend the rest of our lives.

For his day, it seems to me, the Apostle Paul knew a surprising amount about both mirrors and windshields. In the 13th chapter of his First Letter to the Church in Corinth, a congregation Paul loved, he wrote (again, slightly paraphrased): “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see through a windshield.”

What is this *windshield*? Let me be bold to say that I think, for Paul, this *windshield* is LOVE – a wide-love. Paul says, look not in a mirror that's pointed toward a past which grows dimmer ever day. Rather, look to the world and its people, to the church and its people, to their present and future and your own. Look through this windshield of LOVE – love of God and God's people and God's world. Let the vision that you see through this windshield guide you

and your congregation. Whatever you do, do it in love and with love and for the love Christ. It is a big windshield made for going forward; not a backward-looking *mirror* of “the way things used to be.”

So when you meet next Sunday, meet in love and for love and with love. Love that, as Paul says, is patient; kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; that doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love that never ends. Dim memories of the past, however good, fade away. But faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is LOVE. And if you believe that God might be directing you toward a new future, then you will need this big of a *windshield* in front of you to see what lies ahead.