

“More Than A Name On A Plaque ”

Text: Hebrews 11.32 - 12.3

Date 10 November 2019 Remembrance Sunday

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As congregations go, Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church is not very old. Consequently, our sanctuary does not have what so many Presbyterian congregations have in their sanctuaries: memorial plaques that list congregants who died in the two world wars. One year, back in St. Andrew's, I scanned the names on the plaques in that sanctuary, looking for inspiration for the preparation of a Remembrance Sunday service. I noticed that one name appeared twice: James Hogarth. On the plaques for both the First and Second wars. Curiosity grabbed me by the collar, so I applied my genealogy researching skills to learn about this man.

Jimmy, as he was known, was raised in Scotland. He enlisted in the King's Own Scottish Border Regiment in 1894 and served during the South African War. He was 14 years old, and started as a drummer boy. Before that war ended he was carrying a rifle as a regular soldier. He came to Calgary and St. Andrew's Church in 1910 and married Hanna Goodfellow in 1912. Hanna and her younger brother Walter were members at St. Andrew's, and Walter worked with Jimmy Hogarth in the same carpentry shop down in Inglewood. So they were now co-workers and brothers-in-law. Jimmy did not enlist when the Great War broke out, but Hannah's brother Walter Goodfellow did. He went to the trenches. Seven months after enlisting Sgt. Goodfellow died at Ypres, at the battle for Kitcheners' Wood, where the Germans first used poison gas. It would have been heart-breaking for his sister Hannah, wouldn't it? Then, three weeks after learning of her brother's death at Kitcheners' Wood, Hannah's husband, Jimmy Hogarth enlisted, and served as a Company Sergeant Major. Imagine how Hannah felt then. She had just lost her brother, and now she could lose her husband. He came home at the end of the war with not a scratch. He served in the reserves between the wars. At the outbreak of World War Two, Jimmy Hogarth went to sign up, again, but the army wouldn't take him—he was, after all, 60 years old. I am told he was angry and bitterly disappointed. However during WW2 he served in the Calgary Highlanders here at home as quartermaster of the reserve regiment. A few years after World War Two ended, he retired from military service with the rank of Major.

The stories of three people...three real people from a sister congregation. The names of Walter Goodfellow and Jimmy Hogarth appear on the memorial plaque listing the men of St. Andrew's Church who served in World War One. Hannah Goodfellow Hogarth's name is not on the plaque, but it should be, along with the names of other family members who saw their loved ones go to war, and not return. The impact of the first war on St. Andrew's was huge. As the war began, St. Andrew's had 347 members. 139 of them served in the war. Think about that. It is hard to imagine, isn't it? To see 40% of one's congregation go off to war...to every few of weeks learn that one of those people you rubbed shoulders with in the pew beside you was not coming back. To bear with one another in your church their grief. In WW2 St. Andrew's had 180 members. 51 are

listed on the scroll as serving then. Even though he never left Calgary, Jimmy Hogarth's name appears first on the WW2 plaque, as a sign of the respect with which he was held by this congregation, and in recognition the service he had given to king and country on the home front.

Each week as St. Andrew's gathers for worship, the names of 190 men stand in silent witness of the realities of war. It is the same for so many Canadian churches. Plaque upon plaque upon plaque. Age shall not weary them in the duty they have now: the rank upon rank of soldiers who stand now on a very different parade square for us to see. Standing as witnesses. Witnesses have always had an important role in the recording of history, and in the discernment of truth. When a person says, "I was there, I saw", others stop to listen, honouring their message and the insight they are able to bring.

So it was in biblical times as well. We read today from the Letter to the Hebrews, which also gives honour to a long list of witnesses: from Abel and Enoch to Noah and Abraham right down through history. Examples of faith. Examples of lives well lived. Examples to us. Then the author of this letter made a point about these examples, "therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also set aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (12.1). To paraphrase the author's thought, he is trying to get at is this: 'let us look the example of our forebears. Lean on their words. Listen to their stories. Then let us set our lives to fulfilling the work of God's kingdom, drawing learning, direction and determination from them. The experience of witnesses can help us.

I grew up in Guelph Ontario, and in a church there, there is another memorial plaque. It's to a medical doctor who grew up in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, by the name of John McCrae. He was the commander of #3 Canadian General Hospital in France. As a battlefield surgeon he witnessed the realities of war, and captured it poignantly in his famous poem, that still bears witness to the tragedy of war. "We are the dead, short days ago, We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, Loved and were loved, and now we lie, In Flanders fields."

Walter Goodfellow, Hannah Goodfellow Hogarth and Jimmy Hogarth, "loved and were loved." Three witnesses in their own way: Walter's death on the front, Jimmy's first-hand experience in two wars, Hannah's personal loss and years of anxiousness. This is the toll war takes. It is only when we deeply appreciate what the cost is personally, in real human terms, that we can have the determination to say "never again". So whenever we see such a plaque in a sanctuary, or walk past a cenotaph, or drive down Memorial Drive past the Field of Crosses, let us remember. Let us remember the thousands who died whose stories we will never hear. Let us remember the even greater number of those who served who lived, but still bear scars in some way. Let us remember those who never left the safety of Canada, but in their own way were among the casualties. Let us remember that despite the witness of these people, in many ways the world has not changed, and war continues to be a human reality. As Hebrews says, may the witness of our forebears inspire the race we run, saying as we go "never again."