

A Homily on “Roots”
O. A. L. Tjernagel Family Reunion
Bethany Lutheran College Chapel
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1 Peter 5:6–11

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The Tjernagel Family Reunion: We come to it, all with our own agendas, our own baggage, our own thoughts – yet we are here because of something we have in common. As diverse and far-flung as we are, we spring from the union of two humble, lowly immigrants from Norway, who though they grew up a short distance apart in Norway, met in the United States in the Illinois Fox River Settlement of Norwegian immigrants. They married, she at age 16, and later set out with a son, Lewis, and her parents, in prairie schooners for central Iowa to farm the 40 acres Ole had bought some years earlier.

The father, step-mother, the young wife and her husband, each had their own background and heritage. Most of us know little of that, though some have been at the place called Tjernagel on the western coast of Norway between Bergen and Haugesund and chiseled their initials in the rock there. One or two might have been to Follinglo in Valdres, the place from which Nils Anderson Follinglo, Martha Karina’s father, came. But somehow, that is the heritage we celebrate, and for our own private reasons, we come together to honor it, or to seek it out.

Our roots: Where do we find them? When it comes to our Tjernagel roots, we likely go back to Follinglo Farm in Iowa, though we have to do it in memory. Some of us are old enough to have visited it as children, when Jenny, Unko, Tante, Erling, Herman lived there, and at a time when Peter and Marie and children lived in the Stabbur, and Alfred and Henrietta were just down the road. That was long

after the heyday of Follinglo after the award winning cattle, the acclaimed concrete fences and concrete corncribs, and great barns, the band, and family orchestra.

What my generation got to see was the remnant of the work of the previous generation, neatly kept, but not humming at a very high pitch. Then a National Guard jet blew much of it from the earth. So now that exists only as memory and in photo albums. The appearance and the land, and the ethos of the place have gone on to new things. So, that place of roots grows dim.

We have gotten a sense of greatness about Follinglo, the work, the people, the place. Maybe we have even overblown it, maybe even idolized it. It is a place of our roots but only a place. We have other roots too.

We can look for some roots at Tjernagel, Norway the fishing/farming village, where the main crop was rocks. An aerial photo I have shows that it is a big rock with some dirt clinging to it. But as all who have been there testify, it is a place of raw beauty Unko described the spectacular view of the neighboring fjords and mountains and islands. But there isn't much about it that provides us with any sense of our roots.

So maybe we should look further back for those roots, and go to the place called Follinglo, in the region of Valdres, set between Lillehammar and Sogningfjord. Nils Anderson Follinglo was born there, and we don't know much about that place. Unko, or possibly Neelak, may have been the last of our tribe to visit there. There was a severe famine there in the 1840s and '50s. There were more immigrants from Valdres to the U.S. than from any other region because of that famine. So it is hard to look for our roots, and for any glory there.

But there, something about our roots starts to take shape. Nils Anderson Follinglo left there and went to Vestlandet; he became a bricklayer and handyman. He ended up working for a time at the parsonage at Avaldsness just south of Haugesund. At the parsonage was a servant girl, Barbru Mikkelsdøtter. One account says that they got acquainted; another says they were engaged. She gave birth to a little girl, named Martha Karina. Nils was the father; they never married. The little girl lived, the report says, for a time with her mother; then with an elderly couple who loved her dearly, then with her father, part of the time in an educational institution, and finally, with her father and his wife Margarethe Hansdøtter, from the great island of Bømelø and they lived on the island of Møster. The story says that finally was a happy time for the little girl.

And there we start to get more of a sense of these roots; the little girl, Martha Karina, cast from place to place, had not many happy memories, until the home life settled down. And then in 1857, that was torn up, and there was a trip across the ocean, (quite terrible we think on a 747, but downright ugly on a sailing ship). And at 11 years of age, in Norway, Illinois, times were so bad that the young girl had to work. And then, five years later, married, at age 16, to Ole Andreas Larson Tjernagel. And another four years, off across the prairie, and unbridged rivers, and swamps, with a little boy, Lars Johann. And then the Tjernagel fishing village and the Follinglo of Valdres Norway came together for the Tjernagels of Follinglo farm. All the while, their newly adopted country was being humbled by the great incivility of the civil war.

Little house on the Prairie stuff? Guiltless, cheerful, idyllic, sweatless pioneering? Not at all. From the distance we glorify and admire the stuff from whence our genetic stock has risen. Just as we glorify the birth of our nation and do not think of the atrocities and the misery of the revolution, the ugliness of that war, or the worse ugliness of the war between the “United States.”

We celebrate and we glorify the lives of these folks in the distant past. We neglect the humility and the suffering they lived through, and the heavy hand that the Lord laid on them. We must imagine that in 1864, when Ole Andreas and Martha Karina crossed rivers and swamps to get to Iowa, they murmured like the Israelites: “Why didn’t we stay in that less miserable place across the sea?”

Don’t forget they were grim times; they were grim lives; often their reality was the dark hues of Moberg and Rolvaag, stark, dreary, uncomfortable, cheerless, and in the ugly grays and blacks and whites of a Bergman film.

That’s our root. It isn’t Little House on the Prairie; it isn’t the glorious, summer afternoon days under the shade trees at Follinglo with Tante’s lemonade. It is sweat, loneliness, disappointment, loss of place, loss of children, uncertainty, rootlessness, and even always the knowledge that ones way of coming into the world is something less than what others had – even a little shameful.

Why do we focus your attention on all this? Because this is what made your grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents what they were. That is what the lesson today from the Apostle Peter describes: “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.... Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. ‘Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are

experienced by your brotherhood in the world.” Our Follinglo/Tjernagel forebears knew well enough what that meant. Pray God that we do too.

But, we know something else about these forebears. Great triumphant heroes of the faith, outwardly, they were not. No great monuments in their memory just some cryptic mysteries in the church record books. But heroes of faith nevertheless, because of their faithfulness – faith in God’s faithfulness.

If you know and believe that Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ now, it is due to God’s grace – God’s grace for one thing in the way that he led, and cared for, and provided for these souls who “cast their care on him,” who simply believed his promises, and in spite of all that they faced, held God to his promises, and trusted him. Through sufferings, loneliness and uncertainty the one thing that was constant in their lives was that humble belief in God’s gracious redemption, presented to them in the person of the suffering servant Jesus. They knew that they were righteous before God through him; they knew that all they had to offer him were rags and poverty and sin; they knew that their righteousness before God was His perfect holiness in life and in death.

The Gospel was central at that place. I was never there that they didn’t have devotion at the dinner table. Follinglo was a great place of culture and music, and they worked at that. But it was much more so a place dedicated to the gospel in daily life, and when the time came, they did not follow the spirit of the times and try to soften the edges of the faith, but made a bold confession and so, the little country church, Bethany.

When the first generation first Martha Karina in 1907, and then Ole Andreas, in 1919 closed their eyes in death, no one could doubt that their eyes closed in a faith focused on the crucified and risen Christ, as if to hear coming from the clouds of glory the words of Peter: “May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered awhile, perfect, establish, strengthen and settle you” because that was the gospel promise made to them. And so too the second generation. The generations pass, and they pass away.

ARE WE BACK TO OUR ROOTS? Do we have those roots, the ones rooted in Christ Jesus who has called us to eternal glory? It is dangerous for us to romanticize our roots. Roots have to be rooted in the dirt, in decaying stuff. Let us be reminded that we are rooted in the sufferings, temptations, and weaknesses which confront the human spirit the humbling hand of the one who is God over all. But our ROOT is this, that our fathers and mothers in their suffering, “cast their

care upon him.” They believed the promise of God that he would be with them; that in their weakness, He was made strong, and that in their weakness he would glorify them through the suffering, and death, and resurrection of their brother, Jesus Christ.

In celebrating your heritage, begin with your true root, Jesus Christ the righteous, the Savior who has redeemed you, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood.

“To Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.