

Love is our guide!

Good Morning “church”!

Reading on the first page of our Annual report:

Our Vision

Trinity United Church, a congregation of the United Church of Canada envisions a world that lives in the wholeness of God’s shalom.

Our mission

TUC is a Spirit-led Christian community practicing love rooted in the example of Jesus.

Our Focus of Work begins with

To Build and enhance relationships...

Our values - read a few.

These statements – reveal a vibrant, spirit-led people. We know that living out this vision, our mission, our values, takes hard work, not just on Sunday mornings but throughout the week. We know that living well as a faith community all week long takes more than we ourselves can muster – it takes God presence – Holy presence and when we touch the mystery of God our lives are

blessed with wholly love. We come together in the remembering of God’s love/ God’s shalom as the Hebrew people did long ago in the Exodus ritual of celebration. We come to sing to celebrate with a song of Praise and joy filled living as in Psalm 149. We come together to be fed and nurtured from week to week so that we can live out the way of Christ with one another and with those meet throughout the week *as expressed in Matthew and Romans*. We come together as *church* – as people of the way – as Christians- as *church* modeled in the Christian story and readings, seeking to pattern our lives and our communities in Christ love.

We, the *church* – *the body of Christ* are a mixed bunch – diverse, often self-sufficient and independent, yet trying so hard not to be self-serving in a world that is all about the “me”. We come with different skills, different and varied gifts, seeking to build the kinship that Christ modeled for us and calls us into, living out this brotherhood and sisterhood of care in the world we find ourselves in, in the various circles of influence we are part of. We come as *church*, united together into a spiritual family, where bread is broken, the word shared and Christ presence is known among us.

As the people of the way – we know that the living out together of Christ’s model is not always easy – that sometimes – maybe often – we do miss the mark – yet serendipitously – miraculously – we do a good job of being the people of God together, *building and enhancing relationships, supporting and empowering one another.*

Creating a “people of God who need to develop a whole new way of thinking and being” – some might call this a paradigm shift and it is what the lectionary readings in the next few weeks will be about. How to live well together is our focus in the readings today.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Such a way must be centered on the God who first loved us – I have discovered over the years that centering my day in morning prayer is essential for how I live out the rest of the day – loving does not seem to come naturally but as I open myself to God’s love somehow love finds a way. The pairing of the Exodus Passover ritual with the Christian readings today wisely acknowledges and connects the love of God as simultaneously inseparable from love of one another and of our neighbor. We with the Hebrew people of long ago, are invited to come together in holy praise and celebration God’s activity as Redeeming presence and such coming together liberates us along this journey of love opening us to new, yet (and like the Hebrew people experienced) difficult experiences in the wilderness of our lives. As we center ourselves in weekly worship together, the Spirit transforms our lives and this new way of living – a way that is filled with joyful urgency and centered in

loving relationships is what being the ‘church’ is all about..

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Paul speaks of the need for love in the nitty-gritty of everyday life, (and as Brueggemann, one of my favorite theologians expresses it) ‘calling for the difficult task of real love for real people who are met in everyday life’. *Owe no debt to anyone – except the debt that binds us to love one another.... love your neighbor...love never wrongs.* Love is what builds community. Love is what truly matters along our journey and, if we wonder what that second part of the Romans reading, the conversation about what time it is and waking from sleep language refers to, simply put, it is that love matters now! In the moment, in *each moment*, today! Paul urgently reminds us that what happens now genuinely matters!

Church – People of love’s way – this is what the challenges in Matthew’s gospel reading today is about as well. Matthew, in the last few Sundays, has been “sweeping us off our feet” - maybe leaving us ‘uncomfortable and it seems to reach a climax for us as ‘church’ today in Matthew 18: 15-20 that *name* just read to us.

In case we would rather assume the readings are not for us, for another time and place, notice that there are only two occurrences of the word ‘church’ in the gospels and Matthew 18: 17 is one of them.

We heard the first one two weeks ago when the church was addressed as the gathering linked with confession of

faith in Jesus as Messiah, Son of the Living God.

And now, *church* is linked directly with how we live out our faith confessions with one another! How we live out our love!

Perhaps last week we heard the message of a God who hears, who cares, who calls, who comes down to save and then insists that we, with Moses, *go down* – down and out these sanctuary doors to live *in community* our calling as the people of God – a God who saves also insists – no – demands a transformation that can turn us upside down and inside out right here in this place as well. (Remember when you first fell in love – somehow that’s what love does to us – it turns us upside down and then insists on teaching us the daily lessons of living together)

Matthew has just asked us *who do you say that I am?* and now. In the context of baptismal covenant, Jesus takes the disciples aside and speaks to them as the inside circle of believers captured by a new way of living and who must learn what this living as *church really* means.

Let’s listen in once more to this ‘insiders’ conversation: (Read from Inclusive Bible Matthew 18:15-20)

This is a difficult passage to digest, particularly because in today’s world we come and go as self-sufficient individuals with the prerogative to think what we please, live and act as we please. If we encounter what is uncomfortable or conflicting for us, we simply choose to become part of a less challenging circle. But this is not the scripture’s witness. Matthew’s understanding of the church is

reflected in radical hospitality that sees each person as Christ expressions – *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Matt 18:5)* We as church are the body of Christ drawn together into a community of care – we don’t get to say: *I have no need of you. We are not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that regulates its corporate life by the will of a select few – not even of the majority* – because each member – each person is of great value in the eyes of Christ, united with one another in and through and with Christ. In the fellowship of Christ we have been baptized into, we as Christ followers must care diligently for one another. The grace we are called to offer one another within this community of faith is based on the verse immediately following this passage that calls us to forgive “seventy times seven”. The stringent plumbline that Jesus offers us is set before us and if we dare, ask ourselves “*what would Jesus do?*” in our life together it is to offer amazing grace expressed over and over again.

Here’s the hope for me as part of *church* in the world today. That we as God’s people always come together to sing God’s love story and that the Spirit so moves within us that others see our love one for another. It is possible! It is our hope! Because in verse 20 “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I can live out the forgiving grace that Christ calls on me to offer those within our diverse communities because Christ is in me; Christ is with me and Christ is all around me. Centered in Christ we as a Christian fellowship can live by Jesus’ plumbline!

How? Jesus offers a loving way. It comes as a method to 'manage' 'mediate' and 'resolve' differences / conflict among members within a community that is based on what today we might describe as behavioral dynamics based on family-systems theory. When I first began ministry I was gifted by a retiring ministry with two books she considered essential to congregational life and ministry: Eric Friedman's Generation to Generation, a family systems analysis and a book on prayer called Primary Speech. Indeed, centered in Christ we can live by Jesus' standards that call us to: *Go directly to the person...and in a loving, humble manner, seek reconciliation.* If that just doesn't work – then with one or two others, the benefit of an outside, more objective perspective may be helpful.

We know there are honest differences between people. Yet what I think Jesus is addressing here is the 'conflict/sin' that is self-serving behavior and that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. Such wisdom is well applied within our family circles – it has also been applied to professional standards that call on individuals working together to address conflict one with the other before including the larger circles of concern! It is about restorative justice practiced in aboriginal circles, and now in some of our educational and justice circles. The wisdom of caring conversation can bring healing and restoration – within families, within institutions, within our churches! When we walk away from the conversation, those of us called to extend that grace out in the world too often limit God's grace. Renewed relationships and Resurrection become difficult if not impossible!

But when grace abounds – then all things are possible. Remember Jesus at every opportunity extended himself graciously to all people, including those who were outsiders, strangers and foreigners, those who were difficult to live with, those in his day that were called Gentiles and tax collectors, even eating and drinking with them! He was criticized as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners". Jesus never gave up on them and insists that we too never stop reaching out in love to all those within our community of influence, promising his followers the grace needed to restore that which is broken. The world's way is to write people off when things reach a certain point but Jesus' way is forgiving grace 'seventy times seven'. This is the plumbline that the followers of the way are asked to live out! For God's will to be done on earth, here in the church, as it is in heaven, then love must always be our guide! Then Christ will be present among us! Then the church will *really* be the church.

Sustained and held together in the Christ who first loved us, confident in the love of God, in the power of Resurrection at work among us, we can go forth as disciples living out a discipleship Jesus modeled based wholly on love.

He came Singing Love. Go into this week singing love!

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