

## **“The United Church of Canada – A Vibrant Legacy”**

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St. Paul’s United Church, Orillia  
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Creating Spirit....

Lift our spirits this day  
as we recall our legacy  
of the United Church of Canada  
which is a story filled with  
bold inclusivity  
passionate justice  
tender caring  
tears of lament  
laughter bubbling

Help us to claim and celebrate  
the ways you lead us into the  
fullness of life.  
Amen

In the late spring of 1984 or 1985  
I went to a class reunion from my years at the  
The University of Guelph  
in the drama department.  
I had graduated with my degree in drama  
back in 1979 and hadn’t seen any of my classmates since then.  
Two things happened that night  
that have continued to echo through my life  
though they both happened in a span of less than 30 seconds.  
It was to be a gala affair that night,  
and so I intentionally chose to wear an elegant black dress  
chosen not only for its elegance but also because  
black had always been the preferred colour of dress  
for drama students  
for its bold and dramatic flair.  
I was wandering with a cocktail amongst the crowd  
wanting to be sure I said hello to everyone.  
I stopped and chatted with Kathy -  
who said to me  
“I heard you have gone into the ministry”  
- her tone was an interesting combination of

surprise, disdain and sympathy.

Then she said –

“is that why you’re all dressed in black?”

I was stunned –

stunned that that was the perception out there

of the Church – black-

not seen in this moment as dramatic flair

but rather the black of the church

- somber, lifeless, mourning.

As I reeled from this perception of the church

- she asked me what church I was preparing to be a minister in

- I told her the United Church of Canada...

to which she replied –

“Why would you want to be a Minister

in the United Church of Canada –

they’re so washy washy....”

“What do you mean” I asked.

“Oh you know, they’re washy washy –

they don’t have a set of absolute beliefs

and rules that people need to follow –

people need that you know.”

And then she saw someone else and moved away,

leaving me standing alone in the crowd

absorbing and pondering

what she’d said.

I have never seen Kathy again

but she helped my discover

one of the key things that I love about the

United Church of Canada –

Her comments helped me claim the gift of who we are –

which is not washy washy but rather –

we are a church that invite people into a

significant spiritual journey –

to travel with other “companions-on-the-way”

as we open ourselves

to experience the power and the grace

of God’s love in our lives....

as we open our lives to following Jesus.

The United Church of Canada is not

about giving people a second hand set of beliefs

that you must give assent to.

The United Church of Canada is an invitation –

to the journey that leads

to a first hand way of knowing –

of discovering through our own experiences  
the difference it makes to know  
that you are loved and  
to explore ways of living  
radical gratitude to discover for yourself  
the incredible blessings we experience  
when we move out of fear and self-centeredness  
into living our lives from that place of connection  
to our centered self.

That is not washy washy –  
that's bold and risky  
and honours each person –  
celebrating that as we journey deeper,  
there is a community that cares for us  
and encourages us in our questioning and questing –  
a community that will both challenge us  
and comfort us as we share our  
stories of experiencing God in our lives –  
in the smiles of children  
or like a dog who loves us  
unconditionally  
and our stories of our feelings of joy and discontent.

Kathy's other impression that as a minister  
I would have to wear somber lifeless black,  
Reminds me of a perception of church  
that is out there that does not fit  
who we are as the United Church of Canada –  
and so it's our responsibility to  
share the story of how we are different from that –  
and not just the colour of the ministers clothing –  
but about all sorts of pre-formed  
ideas about the Church that just  
doesn't fit who we are.

In our gospel story today  
Jesus tells the gathered crowd  
that a wise man builds his house on a rock  
because then it will stay,  
standing when the floods came.  
As a metaphor for life  
that image makes sense –  
build your life on a strong foundation  
that gives support to everything you do –  
a foundation that places God's love  
at the centre of life,

a foundation that calls us to love  
those we think of as enemy,  
a foundation that demands  
we do our own spiritual work of \_\_\_\_\_ upon lives  
rather than looking at others  
and judging them,  
a foundation to build on  
that encourages us to let our light shine  
in the world to give glory to God.  
This parable of the wiseman  
who built his house upon a rock  
is the summary of the sermon on the mount –  
the sermon that calls us to be  
salt and light in the world,  
that tells us  
that the peacemakers are blessed,  
and that we are to love our enemies.

But if you think of the metaphor  
of building your house on a rock literally –  
it is actually quite difficult to build on rock.  
And the people Jesus was speaking to – knew that.  
Rarely did they build their homes  
on the rocky hills  
where it was hard to prepare the land for the house  
and in the case of the area around the Sea of Galilee –  
the house would be more exposed to cold winds.  
No – people built more readily on the low lands –  
away from the rock.  
But – even so may you once in the span of a life-time  
there would be a flood –  
and the stories would be well known  
of the way the houses fell when that flood came.  
So with that image clear in their minds  
(from stories told down through the generations)  
Jesus tells them –  
build your lives on the foundation of the rock –  
build your lives in my teachings of life –  
so that when the storms come  
you will be able to withstand  
the crashing waves and the buffeting winds.

And that's what we've done  
in the United Church of Canada...  
we have stood strong on the foundation  
that we are called to be

people of justice,  
we are called to be inclusive  
and welcoming of all,  
we are called to be good stewards of this earth,  
we are called to intentionally listen to on another  
as together we discern how and where the Spirit is calling us.

And though we have faced many storms  
and buffeting winds for the foundation we stand upon  
we have trusts that it is built on a rock –  
upon our understanding of the way Jesus lived  
and the way the Spirit calls us to live –  
and so we have more than endured –  
As the years have gone by  
The United Church of Canada  
has become more and more vibrant  
as we have faced the tough issues  
and chosen pathways that others have dared not walked.

Someone recently asked  
what other churches will think of us  
if we do same gender marriages....  
my response was that the  
United Church of Canada has always been  
out on the cutting edge on issues of justice  
and inclusivity.

We ordained the first woman in 1936.  
We were the first to apologize to First Nation People –  
not only for our dishonoring of their spirituality –  
which we did in 1986 –  
but again in the early 90's we apologized for the residential schools –  
an apology given against all legal advise  
that told us we would legally be held accountable  
if we blatantly apologized –  
and we said "fine" –  
that's how it needs to be.  
And not many church magazines  
have topics on theme life  
ours life ethical \_\_\_\_  
(The Observer top church magazine in NA)

I was speaking with Bruce Reason  
from the General Council recently  
to arrange for him to come here to St. Paul's  
to talk about the United Church's interfaith work  
and he wants to come after he's had his sabbatical this summer

because he's spending that time writing about the United Church's –  
roll in leading the way world wide in  
inter-faith dialogues and relations.

I have been at the Toronto Conference Annual Meeting  
for the past two days...  
and there I was reminded again of who we are  
as a church that is conciliar –  
which means that when we make decisions  
we gather a group of people together –  
and share the reports that have been worked on  
and we trust that through that gathered group –  
we will hear and know how the Spirit is calling us.  
I remember when I went to General Council in 1992 –  
we were voting on same gender covenanting services –  
on whether or not we would provide them in the church.  
I was remembering that back in '88  
the representative of our presbytery was ostracized  
when she got home from General Council.  
because she had voted in favor  
of the final report presented to the Council  
on sexual orientation not being a deciding factor  
of whether or not a person is eligible  
to be considered a candidate for ministry.  
The people felt she had not held up her  
responsibility to them to vote the way they had told her to vote.  
But that's not how we do it in the UC  
We send people knowing that they will vote on issues  
based on their prayerful consideration of what is presented.

So there I was in '92  
about to vote in favor of same gender covenant service  
which I knew the church I was in would oppose.  
Right after the vote we sang a song that challenged me...  
It was "This little light of mine"  
Particularly the verse where it says,  
"let it shine in my hometown –  
I'm gonna let it shine".  
Tears poured down my face  
as I sang my commitment to tell my story boldly  
of a love that would not let me vote against  
same gender covenants service.  
Tears – like that for me –  
are a sign the Spirit is moving  
and I realized I was standing on the foundation of Jesus' teachings –

that are not always easy –  
but are life-giving and clear a path that leads to wholeness.

The power of song.  
In the Sikh tradition –  
that we heard about on Wed. night at Encountering World Dilemma  
their teachings are all done by song –  
5,000 songs actually.  
That makes sense because we know that  
people learn theology,  
or actually anything,  
more easily through singing.

On this anniversary Sunday  
of the United Church of Canada –  
we are invited to join in a sampling of hymns  
that reflect the theology  
and ethos of who we are as the United Church –  
different from many,  
but vibrant and strong  
and full of renewed life.

(invite you to remain seated  
and if you don't sing –  
I invite you to still read the words that capture who we are)