

“Living by a Vision that is Beyond Our Own Limitations”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Sunday, October 1, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

World-Wide Communion Sunday and Stewardship One

Scripture Readings: Psalm 25 (VU #752) – Refrain 2

Matthew 21:23-32

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

People who like their lives orderly and predictable are often shocked, confused, even disarmed when things do not turn out as they planned. Such individuals want to know what will happen next in any activity and are worried if they do not know how to plan for any eventuality.

I am sure Jesus had such people in mind when he told the story of asking two sons to carry out tasks in the vineyard. The first son said: “Of course I will help you, Father,” and then decided playing in the park was far more interesting, while the second son said: “Sorry, Father, I am busy,” but later regretted his dismissive attitude and went and did the job that his father requested.

People who hate surprises like to know what will happen. And while the story ends with the query: “Who did the Father find more acceptable?” the truth is neither is helpful when one wants to know what is going to happen. Both surprise the father in ways that can be at the same time disarming and confusing to those of us who want things to be predictable and linear.

The Rev. Cheri di Novo has been the NDP member of the provincial legislature for the Parkdale-High Park area since the early part of this century. A United Church Minister, she has been an outspoken advocate for the downtrodden and marginalized people of her area. Always one who was controversial, she energized the debate at Queen's Park to get the minimum wage to \$10. Others had expressed the need before her, but her passion and community activity made the issue front and centre in debate, and eventually the law of the land. Now we are soon to move to a minimum wage of \$15 that in no small way reflects di Novo's activism and outspoken presence at Queen's Park.

Cheri is about to leave her position as MPP and become the Minister at Trinity-St. Paul's United Church, a church known to be outspoken on issues of justice, and a place that welcomes alternative groups, refugees, and social activist associations.

Today is their anniversary, along with World Wide Communion Sunday, and a former minister, later to become a Moderator of the United Church, the Very Rev. Bill Phipps, is their preacher. They will be looking at ways that they can continue to be a just and active community of faith, no doubt.

Whether we were to interview Bill or Cheri, I am sure their journey through life and their experience of ministry was filled with moments like the story read earlier – times of

eagerly following what they felt called to do, and times of seeking clarity where the actions needed and the process to follow would be less clear.

But like the story shared in Matthew, we celebrate the times when the action taken stirs the heart, positively impacts the community, and accomplishes what is needed.

So how do you relate to the story in Matthew? Are you a person open to being moved by the spirit in ways that surprise you and even at times dismantle your expectations? Or do you want things to unfold as they normally do, with people who simply do as they are told and fulfill all of your expectations?

The more we seek to determine how life should be, and delineate what should happen every step of the way, the more we stifle that opportunity for the spirit to surprise us and excite us. Surely that was part of the purpose of this story by Jesus. Otherwise we would expect the reaction of the father to be angry with the son who did not do what he said he would do, and angry with the son who refused to do what was requested but then changed his mind and did it anyway. Neither one was honest to the father.

Change in order to make a more worthwhile and more helpful decision to act is something we should welcome and even expect in life. Part of the essence of this story by Jesus about the two sons is a reflection on the role of cooperation in life. Neither son is very cooperative. They do not follow through as they say they will, and the father is left wondering what will happen next.

We have that dilemma when someone lets us down. We are left wondering what to do next, and uncertain as to what will take place subsequently. Feeling uncertain is one of the greatest burdens one can carry.

And so the church, in its partnerships with groups around the world, must be clear in what it can do, and not disappoint and let them down. That is why the United Church has been focused in recent years as to where our partnerships are located. As a relatively small denomination, we cannot do it all. We cannot be in every country, or helping with every disaster or every tragedy. But we can work in alliance with other churches around the world to offer our support to their efforts.

And we do.

It is important to do what we say we will do. The principle Jesus delineated still applies today.

People are encouraged when they know they are not alone. In World Wide Communion, we can underline that reality anew – for us and for others.

As we celebrate World Wide Communion Sunday, we are reminded that it is often those who have influenced the life of the church community, and religion in general, are people who were traditional and ordinary in their religious lives, but who were moved to do something unique, not to draw attention to themselves, but to activate a community into new insight.

Martin Luther was a devout priest who wanted to seek reformation within the church of his day. He did not set out to establish a new religious movement, or a whole new denomination – he simply wanted to invite people into a new way of being as Christians.

Dr. Hugh Kerr, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, started World Communion Sunday from the pulpit of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in 1933. A pastor at heart, he wanted to remind the church that the life of congregations, when we work together, can be transformative and impactful.

Why even Jesus himself was a devout Jew who called people into a more accountable faith, and it was his followers, not he, who declared the call into a new religious reality as followers of Jesus Christ and the word “Christian” was born.

As we celebrate World Wide Communion today, and as we enter into the invitation to renew our commitment to the church and our willingness to be part of this congregation, and support its programs and witness in the downtown of Sudbury as well as the world wide partnerships we hold through the Mission and Service of the United Church, may we realize that the vision we can uphold, and willingly seek, is one not limited to us alone as individuals, not limited to us as a congregation in this sanctuary, but one that can be shared with like-minded people who want to be part of a faith that comes alive in community.

The very word “communion” reminds us that it is in community that we are strengthened.

We invite you to share in the tasks that abound among us, to enter into a prayerful participation to share the spirit that surrounds us, and to seek a future that can astound us and others when we realize that the limitations of what can be accomplished are dependent upon our willingness to venture forth as God’s people.