

U.N.I.T.E.D.

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
September 29, 2019

Adapted from Message by Richard Bott (Moderator of The United Church of Canada)

Sometimes called "The Great Commission," these words bring Mathew's Gospel version of Jesus' story to a close. We have followed Jesus, and his teachings, miracles, healings. We witnessed his death and resurrection. Now with the eleven of the remaining "named" disciples we stand on the mountain to which Jesus has sent us.

Yesterday, United Church people like you and me from across the country, including Sudbury, joined Moderator The Very Rev. Dr. Richard Bott in a web-based workshop, and Richard asked those gathered: ***What it might it look like to be a disciple of Jesus today, right here... from Corner Brook, Newfoundland to Burnaby, British Columbia and all points in between?*** We are those disciples.

Most of you have heard yourselves called a "disciple", but have you thought much about what that means? What it *really* means. It's a nebulous word, at times, as we use it, "disciple." Bott defines "disciple" as: *someone who learns from their teacher, not only by grasping the content of what they are saying, but by emulating the teacher's life.* To be a disciple is to be someone who is willing to learn from Jesus – what he said AND what he did.

You and I, being here today, it looks like we are willing to learn from Jesus. So, we are modern-day disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. What does that mean? Bott and his colleague, the Rev. Dave Anderson suggest that it means ***living into six spiritual practices*** or pathways – living UNITED or U.N.I.T.E.D. I like the pathways he suggests and want to share them. They might help you and me to look within, and around, ourselves. They might remind us that "United" we are stronger and healthier than we would be if we chose to be alone.

So the first letter of UNITED, U, for UPLIFTED by God's love. *Lifting up* is rather radical and countercultural - our culture and politics these days models taking down, not lifting up. I don't know about you, but I witness daily messages like: "You need to be more, so you've got to have more."

Jesus said, instead: ***"You are loved by God. That is enough, more than enough!"*** That was a countercultural message then, and it is certainly counter to our prevailing cultural message now. But Jesus doesn't stop there, his essential message is: ***Not only are you loved by God, your neighbour is loved by God in the same way.***

Jesus' message about God's love is unique; I have to say that I don't think our culture, our neighbours, know what to do with us when we show unconditional love. Especially in times when everyone dumps on a person who has done something problematic, all the Facebook posts are filled with vitriol, but we choose to show grace. Real LOVE is radical: Love God with all that you are. Love your neighbour as you love yourself."

Coming together to worship God was an important practice for the Jesus community. He taught in the temple, Jesus taught and challenged his friends to widen its understanding of their relationship with the Creator, while they were in worship.

(UNITED) N – we are NURTURED in worship, not only by being together physically, but also together focusing on the presence of God in the world. It's can be difficult to do that alone. When we gather, we bring together all of our different gifts and strengths, and we're able to care for each other in difficulty and vulnerability. And worship is not just about doing stuff, singing, praying, together, it is as much about be-ing together with one another and being with God. Just be-ing.

I have heard the question asked in many ways: *Can I be a healthy Christian on my own at home without community?* I'll leave you to answer that one. But, Jesus *gathered a community* together, and worship was a pivotal part of what they did together. When you think about it, in community we support each other, encourage each other, model for each other in worship and fellowship together how to be as Christ to one another. Just to give you one great example, last week it was expressed during worship the need for a vehicle to transport the beautiful couch that was donated for the Church School room. One generous person among us immediately raised his hand, *today the couch is in!*

(UNITED) I, INSPIRED by Scripture. In the 1990s, The United Church of Canada took time to explore "the authority and interpretation of scripture". What was discovered was an enormous range of understandings about how to interpret the Bible! At the heart, through of all those variety of approaches, was a common sense of cherishing this "Bible" as a gift. In our Scriptures, we are connected with our spiritual ancestors, as *they* worked to understand their relationship with God.

It is said that, "In the United Church, we take the bible seriously, but not literally." That's a good way to think about it. In the many books that are in between those covers, or your phone app, there are thousands of years of wisdom and faith demonstrated by faithful Jews and Christian.

(UNITED) T - TRANSFORMED through PRAYER. Prayer was an important part of Jesus' life, and one he called his disciples to, too. In the Bible are several stories of Jesus going off to a quiet place to talk to and listen for God. When some of the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he said, "Like this... 'Our Father in heaven, holy is your Name...'" For Jesus, prayer – communication with God – was just part of life.

I sometimes hear a person pray publicly very eloquently. But, when it comes down to it, the best words for talking to God are the everyday words. Think about how you talk with the people you love. Sometimes it may be "flowery," but most of the time it's just everyday language. My "talks" with God are usually in the gift of a quiet moment, but more often as I'm walking along and see a sad sight. I say quietly, "Holy One, hold that person in your care now, and, help me to know when and how I can help." Prayer is a conversation with God about, well, what's going on. Celebrations, but also about pain and loss, and everything in between. Prayer is about intentionally focusing ourselves on God's presence, regularly – as often as we can.

One of the things that Jesus teaches us is that God wants to be in relationship with all of creation – and that includes us. And WE are TRANSFORMED by prayer. Whether or not you believe prayer can change things in the world, I can tell you from my personal experience: when I pray, I am CHANGED. I often look at the world differently when I take time to centre and to pray. I look at myself differently.

(UNITED) E, EMPOWERED through spiritual friendships. It's important to realize that the disciples didn't work alone. Jesus sent them out to share the message, in pairs. Doesn't that make sense? Think about it. If one trips over a bump in the road, there's another there to help. We need each other when we are being disciples. We each have different gifts, and approaches. We can learn from each other.

So, having at least one Spiritual Friendship is important – someone we can share with about our faith life. That's important. Our Moderator has me thinking about this one, you might think about it too – who is my, and your, “spiritual friend”? In the Methodist tradition, the question that was asked at the beginning of each class was, “**How is it with your soul?**” More than, “How are you, today?” it is an invitation – even a challenge – to look at one's faith-life. Sometimes, when life gets so difficult that I can't voice my prayer, it is my spiritual friend who can be my voice in prayer.

(UNITED) Finally, D, DEVELOPED through service. This is the part of our faith life that is visible to others. Living God's love to the best of our abilities. It's about helping those around us, lifting people up. Service is caring for Creation, seeking justice, resisting evil. Serving God is also about recognizing our own sins; our being transformed, turning ourselves around. Serving God is also about recognizing “institutional sins” – I'm wearing this orange t-shirt (School Boards around the country have designated September 30 as “Orange Shirt Day”) as much to remind myself that the United Church I'm proud of was complicit in upholding the evil Residential Schools system that took culture, dignity and too many times, life, from First Nations children. I, and we, must never forget institutional sins, and demonstrate our love by challenging evil systems wherever they exist.

Serving God is to never close our eyes to the increasing racism in our world as well as sexism, transphobia, materialism. The challenges to God's love in our world are long, but I think that God is up to the challenge; and God needs us. This is not at all work we do all alone.

You will note that some of the 6 practices need alone time. But much of the work, the big work, is collectively – as circles of friends, as a church like St Andrew's, and as a world church, all of us seeking to be as the Body of Christ. I'm going to look again at these practices proposed by our Moderator. Would you try them too? I will post them online.

Oh, and are you wondering where the passage that James read fits into all of this? This is not just about growing individually as disciples; God's dream is to help everyone to explore their own faith. The “Great Commission” can be problematic when it is interpreted as Jesus saying: Go out and “make disciples,” by force, if needed. It has been used too many times abusively. It can be read as command, or, it can be read as invitation. “As you go in the world, disciple people. Baptize them ... Teach them what I have taught you.” Invitation, not demand. So, think about it.

How would you like to learn with me, to be a disciple of Jesus?
Can we together seek to live U.N.I.T.E.D.? Amen

Richard Bott's and Dave Anderson's spiritual pathways to becoming U.N.I.T.E.D.:
UPLIFTED by God's love;
NURTURED through worship;
INSPIRED through scripture;
TRANSFORMED through prayer;
EMPOWERED through Spiritual Friendships;
And DEVELOPED through Service.



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