

## **“Responding to Excellence; Creating Encouragement”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

Sunday, October 15, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

World Food Day Sunday and Stewardship Three: St. Andrew's and Local Partners

**Scripture Readings:** Psalm 23 (VU #749) – Refrain 1

Philippians 4:1-9

*(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)*

It has been said that you cannot judge a book by its cover; one also is walking on dangerous ground if you think you can judge a book by its size.

That is most certainly true. And it is also true of the biblical tradition – some of the shorter books of the Bible hold great wisdom, important insights, and dramatic, thoughtful reflections on life and the power of the spirit. Many of the minor prophets – short writings by Amos, Micah and Hosea to name a few – contain some of the most revered prophetic truths that we hold dear.

Paul's book of Philippians is one such example. Last week we heard his reading of being focused on the end prize, and not being caught looking at the past, mired in what has happened already instead of being focused on what lies ahead, while today's reading from that same writing uplifts the need to focus on what is true, just, and honourable.

Now a sidebar insight of this letter is the high regard Paul holds for the women leaders of the church. This is not unique within Paul's writings. Paul is often viewed by some writers as a misogynist who had no use for women and their place in the church. Such a position usually is based on writings from the letters to Timothy and Titus which I, along with most scholars of the New Testament, do not think were written by Paul but someone who came later in the church. But they certainly go against his careful and deliberate praise of Euodia and Syntyche in this passage. Yes, he encourages them to get along, but his focus is that both of them are people who have worked hard to spread the gospel.

But I digress. What Paul is primarily speaking about, and he lifts up these two women as examples of the very teaching he is sharing, is that believers should spend their time looking at what is good, honourable, uplifting, and life giving.

There may be a tradition that being a good protestant involved being a miserable and dour individual, but it is not biblically based, and it certainly is not something Paul promoted. Yet it is true that often when we get together in church gatherings or share stories of church activities we get caught in the negative spin on reality. Talk about dwindling resources and limited volunteers never bring life and vitality to a situation. But speaking about what we are missing or lacking can be a Christian church habit.

Our Moderator, the Right Rev. Jordan Cantwell, has offered some insight on how we as Christians shape who we are, and tell our story (or often fail to tell it) due to habits that are ingrained and frustrating. Let us hear her reflections now... (Moderator's video from Stewardshiptoolkit.ca played)

It is a simple yet direct message. Why cover up the story of what we do on a week by week basis yet come prepared with lots of good news when the Moderator is in our midst?

The Moderator will be in Sudbury and region November 5-8, including a meeting of the Manitou Intentional Learning Community on November 8<sup>th</sup> at St. Stephen's on the Hill United Church, which also involves a youth event over the supper hour. But we are not awaiting her arrival in our midst to remind you and each other of the ways that we seek to be connected to our local community through outreach and involvement.

As a congregation we have many projects on the go. Through the Downtown Churches group we work closely with the Louis Street community. Volunteers led by Rhodine and Marcel have helped to refurbish their gardens, and also support the after school program for children in the community, providing snacks and craft supplies through donations from the downtown churches. The Downtown Churches was the source of seeking connections with such groups as APANO and the Social Planning Council in early development plans for a downtown HUB. Each June the downtown churches in recent years have held a lunch outside the Church of the Epiphany, serving over 200 people on each occasion.

Of course another season of Out of the Cold meals on Friday evenings starts with planning meetings this week. Again, we serve 200+ people most nights. It is a program with incredible support from our congregation and community.

Last year in Advent we as a congregation provided backpacks with school supplies and mittens and scarves for children, or basic personal supplies for street people. Each year we have sought a special project during the Advent time. Through various ventures we have connected with an array of downtown organizations that serve youth, aboriginal people, abused women and the homeless, just to name a few.

Many of you have been intently knitting scarves for the Réseau Access campaign for AIDS awareness that will be located on trees and poles around the downtown, available for those who need a warm scarf in winter.

We all are aware of the incredible commitment to the Qarqouz family by many in this congregation, including financial commitment that has helped them to settle into this city and region. Drivers take them to English classes, sporting events, the "Y," on paper routes and medical appointments, shopping events and driving lessons, just to name a few. While the formal commitment financially will end this December, your gifts of support will help them in this important transition year to maintaining a sustainable life here in Sudbury and Canada.

A prayer calendar has reminded us of the shared ministry we engage in with our neighbouring churches here in Sudbury, and the local ministerial was the root of a conference on the Reformation last month that brought together almost 200 people in an important reflection on the ways that the church, though divided 500 years ago through what was known as the Protestant Reformation, can learn from ongoing reforming

movements in all aspects of the church, and remember that what unites us is greater than what divides us.

Your donations to the Benevolent Fund allows us to support people in crisis or in transition, and we often have reason as ministers to be present for people in our congregation, in our community, and people passing through our community who need personal support of an emergency nature.

There was a time when the church saw mission as their own, and it involved connecting with people in far off lands and unknown to us.

Through the Mission and Service outreach of The United Church of Canada, we still maintain that long-distance relationship with global partners, but we have seen two major shifts in our understanding:

- 1) The mission is not ours but God's, and we are partners with God in that mission (the Mission and Service of the church reminds us of that in their motto: "God's mission; our gifts;")
- 2) Godly mission includes remembering and reaching out to those in our own community, and not just those far away.

When we support youth to attend special events in regional gatherings, when we offer scholarships to individuals seeking university education, when we host Body and Soul lunches for people in the downtown and residents of the Place, when we share Good Food boxes with residents, when we run Community Kitchens through an array of volunteers, we are being a community of faith that reaches out, and living the theme for this week: St. Andrew's and You—Reaching Out to our Community.

Now none of this speaks about the many ways that individual members like yourselves are involved with community programs, volunteer organizations, and not for profit agencies beyond the church.

There is a consistent truth among those who support programs in the community – people who are church goers tend to be among the most active volunteers and most generous financial supporters to other organizations as well. Reaching out is not just a congregationally-centred reality. It is what we do as a matter of faith, the course of living what we believe.

To that end let me conclude by stating this is not solely about doing. It is also about our presence in spirit and in prayer as well. We sometimes miss opportunities in the church and elsewhere because we are afraid of asking for support due to the fact not everyone can be involved to the same level. That is no reason not to ask, and people need to know we seek proportional giving, and do not expect the unemployed or the underemployed to give at a level of those of us who enjoy a professional salary or significant personal wealth.

But having said that, there is no litmus test for involvement. We do not only reward or acknowledge those who are present at church programs and activities or help with fundraisers and community outreach, as important as these can be.

We need in the congregation financial supporters and those with skills and commitment to be involved in an active, physical way. Yet we also need those who lift up the congregation and the church at large in prayer. Without those prayers, our actions would be doomed to fail.

Without your prayers, as well as your personal involvement, we would lack the drive to share, and the ability to care. Thank you for the many ways you participate in our local outreach and mission.