

“Ten Words by Which to Live and Work (Well, at Least Give Me Five!)”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 28, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Reading: John 21:15-17

(Reflections by the Rev. Catherine Somerville and The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Catherine: Happy Anniversary, Bill

Bill: And Happy Anniversary to you, Catherine.

Catherine: Thirty years is a long time. Not as long as 40, mind you, but time enough to look back to a significant period of time in ministry. My colleague Christopher White wrote an article in this month’s issue of *The United Church Observer* reflecting back on his thirty years of ministry. Chris and I graduated together in 1987 from Emmanuel College. Chris used words like complicated, powerful, joy, and gift to reflect back on his 30 years of ministry.

Bill and I came up with our own list of 5 words that we offer to the church in the 21st century.

The first word I came up with is **TEAM**. Jesus was very wise to send his followers out in teams of two. It helps to share the joys as well as the sorrows. I have learned so much from my time here at St. Andrew’s about working together. As a church, you are not afraid to take on big projects, like starting a community kitchen, sponsoring a refugee family, and making the commitment to provide a hot meal every Friday evening through the Out of the Cold program for close to 20 years. Now any one of these projects would be too much for one person to execute, but you have shown me that we can accomplish big, huge, audacious dreams when we do it together. Thank you to St. Andrew’s U.C. for showing me by example. Bill, what’s your story of teaming?

Bill: Well, it is simple, and you should not be surprised, Catherine. It is **HOCKEY**. After all, this is Sudbury – is there any other sport to talk about, with the possible exception of basketball, now that a professional team is heading this way? But I always knew in theological school that the most active hockey players were going to be the best ministers – and for the most part that has been true: Peter Short, a Junior B defenseman and classmate – a former Moderator of the United Church; Bill Blaikie, a Member of Parliament from Winnipeg for 29 years (1979-2008), was a sturdy power forward; and Tom Sherwood, a long time Chaplain at Carleton University, moved from playing basketball at York University to be a steady part of the Emmanuel College Hockey Team. Why, proof of how significant hockey is to ministry is the fact I learned much about pastoral presence by once playing against the Flying Fathers at St. Michael’s College in Toronto.

Hockey teaches one that passing is important – trying to hog the puck never works, but crisp passing, and sharing the puck, allow other players to get open, and for success to be possible. Hockey is a game of anticipation – that is why Wayne Gretzky was such a stellar player, or even Bobby Orr, the almost local boy from Parry Sound. They knew

what was about to happen and planned accordingly. They went where the puck would be, not where it was. Ministry is about anticipation as well as sharing the tasks, and the deeds, with others.

Bill: My second word, Catherine, is **ACCOMPANIMENT**. We all need to feel that we are not alone. Our Creed starts with those words: “We are not alone; we live in God’s world.” Feeling cared for and supported is a human need. And so the word “accompaniment.”

Ministry is often about accompanying people on their journey. We may not have all of the answers (too often, I fear, we have no answer at all), but we can let people know that whatever they face, they are not alone.

One of the most upsetting and yet meaningful journeys I have had in ministry was spending most of a weekend with a family in the University Hospital in London as they sat awaiting the outcome of a brain scan of their husband/son/grandson. This young man, still in 20’s, had been married about 2 years, and was a fit and happy fellow until suddenly he fell ill with an aneurism, and as a result was in a coma. The outcome was not what people wanted – at the end of over 50 hours of keeping vigil, he died. What was even more disturbing was a first cousin of his, and the second of the only two male grandchildren of a couple in the congregation I then served, also died of a brain aneurism. The latter was found dead in his apartment when the family could not reach him.

There was no joy in these events, and nothing really one can say to a family so buried in grief. Yet being there with them, to let them know they are not abandoned by the church or God when they feel otherwise, is a role one must play in ministry. It is a sacred part of our journey as ministers. And now, Catherine, I look forward to your response and further reflections.

Catherine: That sounds to me, Bill, like **LOVE**. I worked for five years (from 2009-2014) as the Personnel Minister for Manitou Conference. More often than not, the Personnel Minister is called in when there are troubles. Sometimes ministers lose their way, and there may be the temptation to blame or disparage their congregation for the situation in which they find themselves. Now, every congregation has a few crusty people, and sometimes life together in community brings tensions and division, but when coaching ministers, I reminded them to love their people. When you love with the care of Jesus Christ, people respond. They may disagree with your views, but they know ultimately that you are there for them. They will respect you for they know of your love. Above all lessons, the most important is to love, with heart, soul, mind and strength.

The third piece of wisdom I wish to share is to allow yourself to be **SURPRISED**. Make room for wonder. In 1987, I was sent to Manitoulin Island on a three-point charge. Green Bay was the most isolated of the churches. Their service was in the afternoon.

Being newly out of school, I had lots of ideas about communion. Before you participate in the sacraments, I had been drilled that you need to be able to articulate their meaning. Only those with a thorough understanding would partake.

One afternoon, the bread was being passed from person to person. Matthew, who was just over a year old, reached out and grabbed a handful of bread and proceeded to stuff bread and fist into his mouth. Everyone laughed. It helped that they were all related to Matthew. They knew something I didn't yet comprehend. They knew that when they gathered for a family dinner, Matthew would be passed the food and he would eat the potatoes and vegetables with the same joy. They would never think of passing by Matthew at their dinner table, just as they would never dream of passing him by at communion.

The wonder was that Matthew knew his place in the family of God. He knew that he was as welcome at the Lord's table as the dinner table. Matthew showed me that day that there is a place for all at God's table. All people understand inclusion and welcome at some level – with child-like certainty, or with the wisdom that comes with deep faith.

And that day I learned a lesson that has changed me profoundly. Thank you to Green Bay United Church for widening my vision and giving me a real surprise that day.

Bill: My third word is **AMAZEMENT**. And I have been amazed over and over again by people and events, many of which may seem small in the world's sense, but are huge events in the lives of those who live them.

I think of my own mother introducing me as the guest speaker of her then church St. Paul's United in Sarnia, and doing such an amazing job. I knew she reluctantly left school after grade 8, here in Sudbury, to get work and help support her family. With that decision, her dream of being a nurse was dashed. Yet on that Sunday she was confident and clear in addressing a congregation of about 120 people, having developed her leadership skills through being active in the church groups. Amazing.

My favourite story is that of Jackie in Manitouwadge. While I was there she graduated from High School. Lots of people graduate from high school, and in the late 1970's, even if it seems like ancient history, it is not THAT far back in time for people to get a high school diploma almost as a matter of course – it was less common in my parents' and grandparents' generations, as I have said.

But you see, the story is in how Jackie got her diploma. Whatever the family circumstances, Jackie left school part way through high school years. She married, had a family, raised two wonderful boys to their pre-teen years, worked as an effective and knowledgeable sales associate in the local Home Hardware, was a vital part of the Sunday School program and UCW in the church, part of many community groups and activities, and somehow took one or two courses a year until she got her high school diploma. By her late 30's. Amazing. She is one of my all-time ministry heroes for her perseverance and steady commitment.

My fourth word is **RELAX**, and enjoy life. For too long we have made religion something that creates anxiety and fear, or at least places unreachable demands on our lives. We need to relax, what we would have said a few years ago: "CHILL OUT."

The rise of meditation and relaxation techniques, the plethora of different types of Yoga and Yoga studios, illustrate the importance of meditation and relaxation in our lives. You discovered that reality this year, Catherine, as you and Ian Buchanan led a series of meditation evenings here at St. Andrew's.

While a student minister at Willowdale United Church, I was part of the Family Life Foundation, where meditation techniques were taught and a regular Monday night Prayers for Healing service was conducted by Chris Slagter, himself a psychic healer. I learned there that there are many gifts in the church, and many ways to express those gifts and share those gifts with others to help us feel comfortable and to be ready to face the challenges of the world.

Catherine: My relax and enjoy story comes from a time in Harriston. I served the Harriston-Cotswold Pastoral Charge from 1990-1992. One afternoon, Betty called and invited me to come to her house that evening. She was the leader of the 4-H club, and the club was starting a series on bread-making. Not only did I end up finishing the bread making course, but I became an associate member of 4-H. And, incidentally, I never did learn how to bake bread. We had to be tested by the Women's Institute, and their judgment was that my hot-cross buns would be best used as shot-puts. I thank the folks of Harriston for showing me what joy there is in community.

My final piece of wisdom actually came from my mom. The day that I told my parents I felt called to ministry, my mom's beautiful face was filled with despair. She told me not to be a minister, for she predicted that I would be hurt. And I have been hurt. But my mom was a nurse, not a minister, and she couldn't have known the rest of the story. I have learned that it is in times of testing that we are given courage. Courage doesn't come in huge, roaring swaths. It comes in little bursts, 20 seconds at a time.

I served twelve years at St. Stephen's-on-the-Hill, 1992-2004. The people there showed me what courage looks like. It shows up in daring to try, in the courage it takes to start over again. Step by small step, you make incremental differences that can change a culture from one of fear to a place of joy. The people of SSOTH were good teachers.

Bill and I have different understandings on this issue. I believe we are given despair, and then we find courage. Bill, your view is that courage allows you to do things you may shy away from. Tell us more.

Bill: Well, whenever I have done something that seemed to be somewhat courageous in hindsight, I am not sure I would have done it had I known the consequences. I dared to venture forth because I thought it was an important stand to take, or action to be done.

When I first ran for political office, seeking a nomination for provincial MPP at the age of 19, I did not weigh the pros and cons. I was raised in a family fairly politically active, and filled with political ideas and concerns, but nothing was ever done to act on those concerns. I decided one day, 8 days before the nomination, I would offer my name as a candidate. Had I known the backlash politicians take, the criticism one gets in seeking

elected office, and especially in sitting as an elected member, I may never have done that foolish act in 1971. But because I had the courage to run once, I did it again and again – finding myself involved in 7 elections from 1972 to 1988. Without courage, I would have stayed on the sidelines.

And courage led to my application to work in the General Council office of our church. I knew the projections, and the denomination's demographics. I was seeking a job where I was expected to raise over \$30,000,000 for the Mission and Service Fund, and I knew any year over the next 5 years that amount could drop by 10% (or more) through no fault of my own or anyone else. Yet I would be ultimately blamed for the decline. For example, when I began, the UCW groups across the country raised over \$2,000,000 of that total M&S amount, and I knew they were losing members and dwindling in both size of groups and the number of groups that existed.

We did not fall 10% in any one year – in fact, during my five years in that position, we did not lose 10% in total – and I would like to think I had a small role in helping the fundraising succeed. But courage came in spite of my fears and uncertainties, not because of them.

For me, Catherine, ministry is unpredictable in its experience on a day by day basis, and very predictable to this extent: without faith and confidence in the decency and common good of people, it is impossible. I need courage in spite of my fears and uncertainties, not as a way to work through them.

At the end of 40 years, I still experience the sense of adventure and courage that I had when, as a 16 year old, I spoke to my local minister about seeking a vocation in the church. I will continue to live that courage and openness to adventure for as long as God and the church will accept my gifts. And, significantly, that minister I spoke with about ministry as a vocation almost 50 years ago is himself celebrating 70 years of ordination this weekend at London Conference. His name is the Rev. Gordon Pickell, ordained in 1947, and a former minister in Thessalon, within Algoma Presbytery, as well as minister of High Park United Church in Sarnia from 1959 to 1976.

Catherine: I offer someone else's words for my final thoughts. Author Sally Armstrong speaks of first tracks – being given the freedom to run as on a beach at dawn, making a path, then having the wisdom to check behind and see what mark you have made.

In life, as in ministry, some may try to lead you astray, down false paths. Some will try to get you to take short cuts or try to wipe away your marks. Instead, we can choose to walk with those who see the creativity in putting down our own tracks. And we can be grateful for all the opportunities that come every day just as surely as dawn brings wide open beach, waiting for you to leave your tracks in the sand. At the end of 30 years, mine is an offering of the deepest gratitude for being given the chance to put down some incredible first tracks, and for the chance to look back at all the marks that we have made along the way.