

## **The Story**

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Aptly named Reading Between the Lines, this sculpture in Belgium is meant to be a statement about the way Belgians see religion today. <sup>1</sup> According to current statistics, nearly one-third of Belgians don't identify with a specific religion. Belgium has many small parish churches, but because of declining attendance, the architects say these churches are falling into disuse. The architects who created it were highlighting this trend of "emptying-out" of churches, and the possibilities of reusing these buildings for art.

I find this interesting, and yes, a bit unsettling. I don't know about how you came to faith, I was born within a community of faith, my first recollections as a child are of doting, sometimes stern elders when I was up to mischief. I'm an anomaly, as most people of my generation either never saw the inside of a church, or, spent some time attending worship, but ultimately left the church. Many more identify as spiritual, but not religious.

This sculpture depicts church as transparent, almost as wispy as a cloud. It has me wondering about this time we live in as Christians. We are no longer part of an "empire" as Christianity had come to be for centuries. That is a good thing. Right? After all, Jesus never spoke of God's kin-dom vision of a mega church.

Did you know that mainstream and even Evangelical churches are shrinking in size in Canada and the United States? Seeing the statistics about Evangelical churches might surprise many of us who presumed that those evangelicals with the big church buildings were thriving. <sup>2</sup> Is that good news?

If we assess our Christian community by its size, or by how relevant it is to the culture outside of this building, or by the power of the hashtags associated with the United Church – no, I don't know what that means either. But by my reading of Biblical Stories – whether the stories of God's Israelite children in the Hebrew Scriptures or Jesus and his band of followers in the Christian Scriptures – I read Story after Story suggesting that size, and popularity, are, relatively speaking, unimportant.

Think of two major storylines in the Bible: a marginalized community of faithful Jews seeking a promised land; and later, a small and eccentric movement following Jesus, sharing their possessions generously, and loving to a fault. In Jesus' vision according to Luke, we are countercultural – not the elite, but in fact, the servants. We are not to

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<sup>1</sup> An article discussing this sculpture, "Reading Between the Lines", <https://www.arch2o.com/reading-between-the-lines-gijs-van-vaerenbergh/>

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting (note that it is dated 2020): <https://www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-Jan-Feb/Not-Christian-anymore>

aspire to greatness by the standards taught by popular culture, but instead we are defined by our capacity to love, to offer unconditional hospitality to absolutely everyone.

If we were asked by someone who had no experience of church or worship, “Tell me about your church.” What would you tell that person?

I think that Jesus would tell a Story. The Bible is full of stories that speak to us about how God blessed the weak and humbled the mighty. We learn how love conquers hate every time when we humans learn that we cannot do it on our own.

What Story or Stories form the foundation of your Faith? Is it a variation on the story of God calling a shy, unassuming person, to do something wonderful? Is it one or several stories of Jesus teaching disciples that often did not understand? His love? Maybe your Story incorporates moments of wonder in your life, perhaps inspiring anecdotes about how St. Andrew’s saints demonstrated Christian love and service to one another, and to strangers.

The last shall be the first; the meek shall inherit God’s kin-dom; The mighty, the people who think they are smarter than the rest, will be humbled. Jesus loving enemies, praying for them even as he is dying on a cross.

We are smaller than we were. Our sibling Christian Churches around the world are experiencing that same anxiety as they, and we, come to share Communion together on this World Communion Sunday. Maybe the Good News is that we have an opportunity to be radical, countercultural. Aspiring not to greatness, but to humility. We are to trust that the unconditional love that Jesus teaches, though it will not gain us popularity, if we together embrace it, live it, then God’s Good News Story, the unfolding of God’s kingdom, or kin-dom, will emerge.

Something in the Reverend Michael Blair’s message last Sunday here at St. Andrew’s: The United Church of Canada General Secretary invited us to pray for each other. He even went so far as to suggest we take a full week away from our “work” to pray for each other. That idea has returned to my heart and mind regularly this past week.

We are given a gift, in a sometimes lonely, cold, world, we have this gift of community, church. It is passed to us by ancestors, and we are called to love this gift, nurture it, so that generations to come will enjoy it.

That letter from Paul, speaking gratefully of Timothy’s mother and grandmother. He is a product of his community. So are we. Alone we can do a little, but together, and grounded in faith, we can move a mountain – or a mulberry tree.

What is the Story that you will tell that inquisitive friend or stranger? What is the story that feeds your unique Christian faith, and motivates you to love even in spite of indifference around you?

Our collective Story as a Church, grounded in prayer, and more prayer, and yet more prayer, will be our pillar of light guiding us through night, and, the cloud of protection by daytime. God of ancient Story is right here with us. Amen.