

## ***Faith Like that Grain of Wheat***

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

June 9, 2024

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I want to begin by reading from a wonderful article by Dr. Phyllis Airhart article<sup>1</sup> in 2015, at reflecting on then the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The United Church of Canada:

Does The United Church of Canada have a death wish?...

If a reporter had put that question to some of the thousands leaving the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto on June 10, 1925, they might well have answered yes.

Much of the publicity for the event they had just witnessed had billed it as the birth of The United Church of Canada.

The sermon they heard that day, however, was a sombre reminder that discipleship demands sacrifice and sometimes even death.

The elegant 37-page order of service gave few hints about the sermon. Scheduled after the formal declaration of church union, it was tersely listed as "Communion sermon (by a Minister appointed)." As Methodist Rev. S.P. Rose from Wesleyan Theological College in Montreal strode to the pulpit, the audience perhaps expected to hear him preach on the lesson from scripture read earlier: a passage from John 17, with the words of Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one" so often quoted by proponents of church union.

Instead, Rose began by reading John 12... then delivered a sermon that focused on one verse in particular: "except a kernel of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Challenging his listeners to embrace a willingness to die in order to "enter into a larger life," Rose pressed the point that the grain of wheat that does not die will perish.

The image of wheat falling to the ground must have been a poignant one for those who just moments before had ceremonially relinquished their old institutional names, and symbolically bequeathed a prized feature of each tradition to the United Church as an "inheritance." The ritual captured the paradox that had brought them together: they intended to be a life-giving presence in communities across Canada in the future — and were willing to let their separate denominational identities die to make it happen.

Penny Nelson, one of the co-writers for whom I'm grateful for creating most of this worship we are enjoying this morning, grew up on a small farm in Alberta. She asked her father, a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation wheat farmer, about his thoughts on Jesus saying the words we heard today:

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24)

Her father responded:

Farmers know that seeds are only viable for so long. If you don't plant those seeds within a certain time frame, the seeds actually die and you won't get any crop from

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Airhart, "The United Church, at 90, is at yet another historic crossroads," Broadview Magazine (June 1, 2015).

them. So, there's no point in trying to save your seeds for posterity. If you hoard your seeds and never, ever plant them, they're worthless.

Penny reflected on her dad's observation:

The same is true with our churches. I see people in pews who are so afraid of the church dying that they can't see (that fear can) actually kill the church. (Not being) willing to use their money to try planting something new; (we) just hold onto their money, and their congregation dies because they didn't even try to plant hope with the resources they have. They aren't willing to try new things because they feel the life of their congregation is so frail, but if they aren't willing to let go of their fear of dying, they are just going to die anyway.

Jesus doesn't call his followers to die for the sake of dying. He calls his followers to let go of our resources for the sake of growing hope and life all around us.

There is a lot to take in there. In spite of our anxiety about growing small, dare to dream God's dream, to invest our most valuable seeds in something of substance. That is bold, and that is what the national denominations did in 1925, bringing the best of who they were and investing in a new body of Christ. Then other denominations did the same years later.

Just a week ago, we listened to Jill and Ron, the work of our dedicated Doing Discipleship Steering Team, laying before us the options we will choose from in September. We could keep on keeping on, stoically defying the challenges, and the voices in our heads that tell us we need to try, to risk, something new. On this Union Sunday, the day that we celebrate the inauguration of The United Church of Canada, we are reminded that letting go, that in some ways, dying, was, paradoxically, the act that gave birth to this United Church of ours.

We have taken stands that other Christian denominations avoided, not because it was the measured response to pressing issues of the time – we made decisions because they were faithful, they were – in their hearts of hearts – the decisions we were called upon to make. That is our legacy, foolhardy as it may seem.

I hope that St. Andrew's United Church, you and I, remember this legacy when we prayerfully discern our path forward, together. That we have a history of giving people around us something to talk about. They might deem us foolhardy, but foolhardy we may be, if we are fools for Christ.

In an insular, me-first culture, we choose to spend our Sunday mornings, and some of us together for many meetings, without pay, without fanfare, week after week. We invest in Jesus' model of community – extravagantly sharing our treasures of time and money, often benefitting neighbours who have little power or voice.

We give thanks that we believe this foolhardy seed of a vision was planted 99 years ago tomorrow, and that we have nurtured that vision, perplexing people near and far for all those years since. That is what Jesus did in ancient times, baffling people.

May we continue to seek God's vision, courageously, faithfully. Amen.

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