

June 14, 2015

John 17: 1-2, 6, 17-23

90 Years Old / 90% Over, Or ??

The Gospel lesson from the June 10, 1925's Inaugural Service contains the motto of the United Church.

**“That all may be one.”**

This scripture expresses the desire for unity that was the dream of the architects of the United Church of Canada – the hope that the entire protestant church might become unified in order that the world might know **Jesus** as saviour through the witness of our unity.

The theme of Christian unity runs through this passage, however, our unity has not been founded on total agreement. Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist and Union Churches had different personalities, different polities and different theologies. In this, we continue to be marked by diversity. Somehow we remain unified in our diversity. In fact, we have made a virtue out of it with the slogan **“United in our diversity.”** We remain an open church not requiring a uniform confession of faith or catechism.

Instead, our unity is founded on love – **God's** love for us, and our love for one another.

Our unity is founded on mission – our being sent into the world in such a way as to reveal **Christ**.

Our unity is founded on the Word – our relationship to **Jesus**, which through scripture and practice evolves and changes with our changing times.

Now, this was the gist of what the sermon was supposed to be about 90 years ago. However, as an article in the United Church Observer revealed this month, the actual scripture passage preached by the Rev. S.P. Rose from the Wesleyan Theological College here in Montreal was John 12: 24-32. He then delivered a sermon 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 article summarizes the sermon that day as calling the various founding groups to die to some of their cherished practices in order to come alive to something new and greater together.

Just imagine the power of these words as just moments before the founding churches had ceremonially relinquished their old institutional names and symbolically bequeathed a prized feature of each tradition to the United Church as an inheritance. (Look at our United Church crest for the symbolic inheritance each gave.) The sermon and the ritual captured the breath-taking paradox that brought the churches together: they intended to be a life-giving presence in communities all across Canada and were willing to let their separate denominational identities die to make it happen. Wow! That was really something: The paradoxical power of dying in order to live.

90 years later-( change gown etc.)

90 years later, dying in order to live is the central message for us all over again. As church historian, Phyllis Tickle points out, we find ourselves in the middle of the Great Church Rummage sale that happens every 500 years. In the midst of all the theological, cultural, emotional and physical stuff that the church has acquired, the seed of faith that we carry has to be buried and die in order for something new to emerge with new life.

The Comprehensive Review that we are presently undertaking in the United Church of Canada is our present attempt to come to grips with this scripture verse. **“Unless a grain falls into the earth and dies it remains alone and bears no fruit.”**

As we struggle with the Comprehensive Review Report, I have asked myself a number of times, *“Are we 90 years old or 90% over?”* and I’ve wondered whether the prescription being proposed is going to kill the patient prematurely or save it? Only time will tell.

But let me offer a preliminary prognosis.

Yes, we are 90 years old. We continue to serve **God** and humanity and certainly have much to celebrate. However as re-enacting our Inaugural Service today plainly shows, we have certainly changed a lot over the decades and it is obvious that we have needed to change a lot. In fact, the way we have been is **90%** over and needs to be **90%** over. The good news is that we have **10%** left to continue to evolve into a new creation. But what we do with the **10%** left to us will determine what or if there will be a next 100 years in **God**’s service.

Over the 90 years we discovered that our **unity** was not and is not founded on total agreement. But this diversity we have learned to celebrate is going to have to get even more diverse in order to have future as **God**’s people. Faithful people in the future won’t look like us, act like us, or think like us or they would have already be

here. And yet we are the ones best prepared to be open and accommodating to such diversity.

We are learning that it is not what is right but what helps that draws us into **God's New Day**. External rules and pious practises are no substitute for the new challenge of practising our faith every day, every way we can. We know how to offer aid understanding and compassion.

So going forward, our unity and future are grounded on **love and forgiveness** – **God's** love for us, and our ability to abandon judgement and so love accept, and forgive one another.

Our unity and future are grounded on **mission** – our being sent into the world in such a way as to reveal **Christ**. This means joining with non-church folk in causes that celebrate and protect the dignity of all creation.

Our unity and future are grounded on the **Spirit** – who guides and directs us to a new ways of being and becoming **God's** people. The future embraces diverse groups that seek to be **Spirit** led and **Spirit** fed. Our open Church approach frees up enough to be part of this Spirit led and Spirit fed movement.

**The Application for Today**

***Yes! We are 90 years old and it sure appears that we are 90% over!***

***But, we've got the promise that if we faithfully and courageously let go and let God, a whole new life will emerge.***

Amen.