

## Sermon for Sunday January 27, 2008

### United We Stand, Divided We Fall....

*Rev. Gaylyn McLean*

Well folks, I've been preaching here from this pulpit for almost two years now and I have a confession to make. Yup! My confession is that I am proud! I am proud of this United Church of ours! I first started attending the United Church when I was about 7 or 8 years of age. My father's family was not religious at all. Apparently my Grandfather would drop my Dad and his four siblings off at church each Sunday morning with a nickel for offering then pick them up again after church was over. The kids realized that they had free reign for an hour each Sunday and money in their hands, so they'd walk in the front door of the church then walk right out the back door and head to the donut shop. Until the Sunday when my Grandfather was standing at the backdoor to greet them! I don't think they tried that again.

My mother's family on the other hand, were rather conservative and strict Baptists. Church Sunday morning, Adult and children's Sunday School in the afternoon then back to church for evening service that night. No card playing on Sundays, and you certainly didn't dance, drink liquor or wear nail polish.

So out of these two diverse experiences of church and faith I was raised. We started out in the Baptist church then became members of the United Church. I struggled through Sunday School always feeling that every other child their knew their Bible stories better than I, then as a teenager attended a church that had Drama clubs, Sanctuary band, youth group, teen choir...All kinds of opportunities for me as a teenager to feel welcomed and given the opportunity to contribute to the community that grew more and more like "home" to me.

When I was seeking ordination, it was during the time of the "great divide" of the United Church, "the issue", whether or not to ordain gays and lesbians. And so throughout my life I've identified myself as the "black" sheep of the family, the rebel, since I became ordained in the United Church where most of the rest of my extended family are Baptist. But they still pray for me, which I appreciate!

Needless to say, when I offered to marry my cousin this fall, and his partner I was unexpectedly thrown in the midst of a gale force wind of controversy and flying emails as family members sided either with my cousin and myself, or his parents and their different views toward same gender marriage.

I have come to appreciate that no matter what the issue, that like any other human beings, Christians can be divided about what they believe, how to interpret the scriptures, and how we are to live our Christian faith in the world. I am not here to debate the issue of same gender marriage, but rather to use it as

an example of how deeply religious and faithful people can be so different. And as I began to say moments ago, I am so proud of this United Church of ours, because for me the significance of it is the fact that we began as a group of faithful people who dreamed and envisioned one, united church across all of Canada.

Salem Bland, in an article for the Toronto Daily Star dated February 11, 1927 wrote “The Group of Seven and the United Church of Canada seem to me to be the two most original and distinctively Canadian things Canada has produced.”

Donna Sinclair, former editor of The United Church Observer wrote, “Not everyone in every congregation expresses his or her faith in the same way. United Church congregations usually acknowledge their differences, and don’t seek uniformity. One reason for this is that the whole United Church began with compromise. Three denominations – Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational – joined together to form the United Church. Each had to offer some flexibility to do that. To this day, agreeing to disagree is a cherished United Church tradition, although we are better at it some days than others. “

In a conversation with one of my Baptist cousins who has just started reading the United Church Observer, he was surprised at the different points of view recorded in various letters to the Editor that were printed on a variety of subjects. He said, in the Baptist church you all agree, there is no disagreement, because if you do, then you leave and start another church!

So often when we reach a point of disagreement that is often the case. One of the two parties leaves. Nothing is resolved; there is no room for gaining a greater understanding or appreciation for the other person’s perspective. The conversation stops, and when that happens real division or break down occurs. Did you know that the word “conversations” originally meant “to live together” or “to share a life”. So when dialogue or conversation breaks down, then we are no longer living together or sharing our lives.

In a comprehensive research study into what mainline Protestant churches were actually thriving in North America contrary to the notion that only Conservative Evangelical Mega churches were thriving, Diana Butler Bass presented her findings in a new book entitled “Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighbourhood Church is Transforming the Faith”. One of the characteristics of a “healthy and thriving” church these days she says is diversity. A church which she describes as full of difference but not a lot of division. She suggests that many churches seeking “diversity” are seen as a sign of God’s love for all humanity. She writes that she’s heard leaders/followers of the religious right attack diversity as “political correctness”. Some see it, she says, as evidence that secularism has invaded the church. To them diversity is merely a form of popular relativism, an “anything goes attitude. (p.147) On the other hand,

Diana Butler Bass describes the Christian practice of diversity not as secular relativism but rather as an active construction of a boundary-crossing community, or in other words, a family bound not by blood but by love, which witnesses to the power of God's healing in the world. She states, throughout the scriptures, from the time of creation onward, God is a God who delights in diversity. Yet in the midst of this variety, she goes on to say, the practice of love bound together the Christian community into a kind of oneness that honoured diversity while at the same time, fostering harmony and unity – creating a new kind of family; “an inclusive, table fellowship that emulated the social practices of Jesus”. We identify with this idea of “table fellowship” when we think about gathering around our “table” for communion where all are welcome, no one is excluded.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates diversity and the church's faithful role as host to all who may come to her door....

Thanks to Geza, I have this to share with you this morning...

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college.

He is brilliant. Kind of profound and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students but are not sure how to go about it.

One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat.

The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now, people are really looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything.

Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit, and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet.

By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick.

About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, an usher is slowly making his way toward Bill.

Now the usher is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and, as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he's going to do.

How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy.

The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach the sermon until the usher does what he has to do.

And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone.

This week we celebrate "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". Christian unity does not mean that we all believe exactly the same things, but rather that we share a faith in God and the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and do our best to live as faithful followers. It does not mean we will always agree, rather that we are committed to staying in the conversation, to live our lives of faith together, to share our lives of faith together and to live and hope for a day full of God's justice and peace so that all might be blessed with abundant and grace filled lives. That we can agree on. The rest, we'll work on with God's help ....

And in the weeks and months ahead it is my prayer that we the members and adherents of St. Paul's, with all our diversity, and different experiences and opinions will work together toward seeking God's will and plan for the future of this congregation. The decisions we make in the months ahead will profoundly affect the future mission and ministry of this congregation. So let's celebrate our diversity, let's seek the guidance and wisdom of the one whom we follow, and no matter what we decide to do, to restore, rebuild or relocate, may we do so as one community of faith, loving, caring and welcoming to all and to one another. So that this time next year when we're in the midst of whatever we've been called to do, we'll all be able to say together: I'm so proud of this United church of ours. Aren't you?

Let us pray ...