

AUGUST 12, 2007

WORSHIP LEADER – Cathy Stewart

Sermon: 'It Was the Springtime of our Life'

"Be not afraid, little flock." All summer in Luke's Gospel we have been reading about discipleship – about healing and hospitality, about serving and listening, about praying and inheriting the kingdom. Today we are called in both our readings to be disciples, learners of what is valuable to God.

Isaiah says "cease to do evil, learn to do good

Seek justice

Rescue the oppressed

Defend the orphan

Plead for the widow

Luke writes: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

"Be dressed and ready to serve."

One scholar, Michael Trainor, writes that Luke's gospel answers certain questions. One is 'how do Jesus' followers live authentically in new cultural and social situations and yet remain faithful to the original spirit and vision of Jesus'? A second is 'can these Christians trust that God is really with them'?

Luke's gospel answers by telling stories – stories first told to his fellow Gentile Christians in the late decades of the first century but treasured down through the ages and speaking to us today.

While I am with you for three Sundays, I would like to tell the story of certain saints who were challenged to find authentic ways to follow Jesus in the new cultural and social situations that they found here in Canada. From their days to ours, we may glean ways to live as faithful followers of Jesus and learn to trust that God is yet with us.

Let's travel way back in time to the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Canada is a very big expanse with 4-5 million people, mostly living in small settlements, especially in the vast territories of the north and west. Politically, we are beginning to organize ourselves into a federation, a dominion of provinces. Working out division of powers and financial responsibilities is tricky. Everyone jealously guards their own back yards. Socially we reflect the dominant European manners except where they don't work. There are no lairds who own all the land. Small independent farmers and tradesmen can make a living by working hard. In the religious sphere, Roman Catholics make up a little better than 40% of the population but we are most interested in our forebears in the Reform churches. The Protestant churches are divided and often divisive.

The Spirit of the age called for pioneering and nation building. People saw that there was a need for co-operation, for being discerning enough to put first things first. Let's see how three denominations rose to the challenge.

The Presbyterians traced their ancestry back to John Knox (1513-1572) who brought religious reform to Scotland. Their tradition was strongly biblical and aware of the majesty of God. Preaching played a central role along with scripture reading. Simplicity in worship and church décor characterized the denomination. They had great respect for the Sabbath, for learning, for good order. Scottish settlers brought their faith with them to Canada.

The Methodists followed the brothers Wesley (Charles and John d. 1791), both ordained ministers of the Church of England. These two preached and sang with great zeal and were soon unwelcome in many Anglican churches. They developed bible study classes with worship; this was their method of spreading the good news. Their followers were socially active among the poor and needy. They fought against the evils of their age – especially drink and miserable working conditions. There were Methodists in Canada before the 1800's.

The Congregationalists, or Puritans as they were once called, were fiercely independent in their thinking and in scripture interpretation. They refused to accept the authority of the Church of England. They came to North America, some on the Mayflower, seeking religious freedom. They lived simple, exemplary lives following Reform beliefs much like the Presbyterians. However, they held to the independence of each congregation as the people of God. Robert Browne, a church founder (d. 1633) wrote "the only true Church is the local company of believers in Christ, bound to him and each other by a voluntary covenant. Christ is its head. . . no church has authority over any other; but each owes all others brotherly interest." Congregationalists came to Canada as UE loyalists and from Britain

The 1867, the success of political unity among the colonies of British North America may have blazed trail for each of the churches. The Presbyterian Church of Canada was the result of nine different unions, completed in 1875. The Methodist Church of Canada emerged in 1884, the result of 8 different unions. The Congregational Church of Canada was formed in 1905 as the result of four different unions.

Still more was needed. In 1902 a Presbyterian fraternal delegate to the Methodist General Conference in Winnipeg proposed that "the time is opportune for a definite, practical movement concentrating attention and aiming at the practical organic union." His proposal was formally adopted and a committee was struck to begin the process.

In fact the need for cooperation had already pushed churches in the vast areas of the west to form 'union churches' on the prairies. By 1904 a joint cttee, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist, concluded that organic union was

both desirable and practicable. Letters were sent to the C of E in Canada and to the Baptist churches in Canada inviting them to send delegates to further discussion. The Anglicans and Baptists replied in courteous terms but took no action.

Now the real work started. Within 7 years our fathers in the faith had drafted and approved the Basis of Union, including doctrine, policy, the ministry administration and law. These were submitted to the courts of the three churches and approved.

The twenty articles of the doctrinal basis of union are not novel but owe much to two documents; A Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith issued by the Pres. Church USA in 1905 and the Articles of the Faith of the Pres. Church of England, 1890. Believing that everyone must be open to the leading of the spirit in search of new truth, the Congregationalists resisted subscription by ministers to any statement of faith as a condition of ordination. They convinced everyone that nothing more than 'essential agreement' would be required.

Despite winning a majority on all votes, union did not proceed smoothly. There was an ardent minority in the Presbyterian Church who were unwilling to lose their denominational or Scottish identity. They also had concerns about theology and about the proper procedure for making decisions. In the end, two thirds of Presbyterians supported union and one third remained Pres.

When the United Church of Canada Act came before the House of Commons in 1924, an elder of St. Andrew's Pres Church, Wellington Street Ottawa opposed the bill. His name was William Lyon MacKenzie King. John Shearman writes that "An ardent Methodist unionist from Quebec's Eastern Townships skillfully negotiated enough votes from French Roman Catholic backbenchers to pass the bill despite the Prime Minister's opposition."

Twelve thousand people assembled in the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto on June 10, 1925 to witness the solemn act of covenant that created the United Church of Canada from Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist and the Local Union Churches. The four uniting churches hallowed the Union with the following words:

The sacred covenant of union was signed on sheepskin parchment by the leaders of the uniting churches.

The division in the Presbyterian Church did generate bitterness and complications. It could have been worse but for the action of Dr. Samuel Chown who was widely expected to be elected as the first Moderator of the United

Church. The election took place a week after the ceremony of union. Dr. Chown rose and announced "I have felt that a Presbyterian had better be selected as moderator. . . I move that one ballot be cast by the secretary for the election of George Campbell Pidgeon." A witness, A.A. Radley wrote "The Council seemed bewildered by this unexpected action, until Dr. Pidgeon assumed the chair. Then, after making his acknowledgement of the dignity conferred upon him, he described Dr. Chown's "fine act of self-renunciation – the finest act of its kind in the history of Canadian Christianity." The Council burst into a whirlwind of applause that gave some expression to its pent-up feeling."

As an editorial said there were giants in the land in those days. Our fathers had dreamed great dreams.

Is this the time to recite 'they live happily ever after'? Not really. There remained many thorny issues to deal with. There was a surplus of ministers and buildings. Union and anti-union congregations went to some lengths to spite each other. In Cape Breton, when one congregation voted against union, the unionists floated an abandoned church 20 miles down the river and established it right beside their old church. The two congregations held services at the same time, studiously ignoring each other. One Cape Bretoner sighed and put it this way, "In my opinion, the devil got into us."

Wisely, church leaders did not bring in a lot of changes. Individual churches stayed with the form of worship they were comfortable with. A new service book in 1932 offered only guidelines for services. The new Hymnary in 1930, on the other hand caused a minor furor. Any one surprised?

As well as preaching the Word, united church ministers faced all the challenges of living in pioneer times. Tending to one remote 6 point charge was a particularly remarkable pastor, Lydia Gruchy. The fact that she was not ordained meant she couldn't preside over admission into church membership or the sacraments of baptism and communion. The Presbytery started asking for her ordination in 1925. After years of debate and caution the General Council put the question to a vote. In 1936, the presbyteries approved the ordination of women by a vote of 79 to 26. Lydia Gruchy was ordained at St. Andrew's Church in Moose Jaw on November 4, 1936

Our fledgling church also had to deal with the Great Depression and the terrible drought years on the prairies. Would the newborn be blighted by the storms that ended the springtime of its life? The story continues next week.