

AUGUST 26, 2007

WORSHIP LEADER – Cathy Stewart

Sermon: 'Autumn Leaves'

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds
and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in
the thoughts that we all form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants
listen. Amen.

Can you imagine how Jesus spoke the words we heard in today's Gospel? The
first part, spoken to the disciples, I imagine this way:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a
baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is
completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell
you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided three
against two and two against three; they will be divided:

Father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law,
and daughter-in-law against mother in-law.

Then he turns to the crowd and challenges them:

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you
immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the
south wind blowing, you say, 'there will be scorching heat'; and so it happens.
You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but
why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

In the past two weeks we have remembered the springtime flowering and the
summer luxuriance of the United Church of Canada.

Following natural order, we have arrived at autumn. The wheat and the tares
have grown and we can see now what is what.

From the mid 1970's to the present, the United church was often in the news. I
was willing to consider the UC in the early 80's when I became lonesome for a
God I wasn't sure existed. That was the courageous church that had spoken
against the Vietnam war and acted against apartheid in South Africa. It was
taking in boat people and calling attention to multinational corporations making
huge profits on the backs of the world's poorest – like Nestle and Infant formula
in the third world. I was interested in a church like that! But then, as now, we
were a church in a cultural milieu that determined our assumptions and coloured

how we saw the world and our role in it. We now have a long enough history to see times when we had a good message, good intentions and still did very hurtful things. Let's take a look at our role in educating native people.

From roughly the turn of the last century it was the policy of the Government of Canada to provide education to a portion of the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada through "Indian Residential Schools." The schools were part of the government's general policy of assimilation that was explicitly stated even into the 1950's. Four churches were involved in the operation of the schools on a contractual basis with the federal government: Roman Catholic orders, Anglican, Presbyterian and United. The Methodist and Presbyterian churches prior to union in 1925 each were involved in residential schools, which then became part of the mission work of the United Church. It is estimated that 100,000 children attended the schools, about 20 per cent of the potential status Indian students.

The number of United Church-related schools ranged from a high of 13 in 1927, to six in 1951, and four in 1966. In 1969 the federal government completely took over operation or closed all of the United Church-related schools. These schools were predominantly in western Canada. They tended to be in regions where mission activity and churches had been started among Aboriginal Peoples. In 1927 the United Church also was involved in the operation of 42 day schools in Aboriginal communities. Chronic under funding by government was always a concern.

The United Church's involvement in Indian Residential Schools did not develop in a vacuum. They were one strand of the work undertaken by the church to make education accessible to children for whom there were no schools because of their class, gender, ethnic origin, or religion. For the forerunners of the United Church, access to education for children of low-income families was an important strategy in the struggle to secure greater justice and to subvert the privileges of established elite classes.

In the early years, the churches explicitly supported the assimilationist goals in running the schools. Thinking began to change in the 1940's and 1950's about the harm to children in separating them from their families and the increasingly evident failure of assimilation in practice and as a policy goal. The Apology to Native Congregations was delivered by General Council in 1986. In 1990 the churches and Canadian society more broadly began to hear the stories of former residential school students and their families, which included descriptions of cultural, physical, psychological, sexual and other abuses. In 1994 the General Council of the United Church established The Healing Fund, a \$1 million fund-raising and educational campaign to support healing initiatives of First Nations. Over the generations many United Church folk answered the call of their church to serve in residential schools through either the Board of Home Missions or the Women's Missionary Society. In its 1998 apology, the United Church confessed its complicity in a system that, from our current perspective, was wrong. By so

doing, the church did not call into question the personal dedication and self-sacrifice of many who worked in the schools. Several staff pointed out the shortcomings in the operation of the schools, and urged the church to end its involvement long before 1969. Most staff did not know of the physical and sexual abuse being perpetrated by a few, and feel particularly betrayed by fellow workers who deeply hurt children in their care.

The residential schools have taught us a bitter lesson; even if we live exemplary moral lives, we are complicit in corporate sin that hurts the innocent. It is something we can never ignore because most of us live privileged lives. Yet we are in dialogue with the First Nations peoples. God has stayed with us saving us from despair and leading us to listen and offer the support asked for. We are working for “at-one-ment”. We pray that in the future we will be forgiven and the pride and culture of the first nations will thrive. In the coming years, we may learn to respect their wisdom and reverence for creation. “Will the white people ever learn that you can’t eat money?”

What else has happened since the 1970’s? Well, the boomer generation, the most fortunate perhaps in human history, grew up to question all authority and become remarkably insular from traditional communities like the church. We have seen the entry of women and minorities into leadership roles in the church.

Prestige and dollars are still largely controlled by men in the church but there are many paying jobs for women too. Our modern men sometimes wonder how come they get the short end of the stick. One Arnprior journalist, Peter Hessel wrote about growing up in a strongly patriarchic German home. He remembered his father as the ruler of the home; the children never questioned, expected many reprimands, were not considered very much in the running of the home. The comfort of the father trumped all. Well, he comforted himself, one day he would be the father. And he was, in the 70’s and 80’s in Canada. The world had moved on. The father was expected to help in child care. The household revolved around the children not the father. He felt very hard down by! The pigeons of all the changes in the last few decades have come home to roost. All the new buildings of those decades need expensive maintenance. The faithful builder generation is aging. We boomers have time, energy and money but only a minority have chosen to be active in the church. Many young families with both parents working outside the home have no time for church or try the large Pentecostal churches. The Emerging Spirit Initiative suggests that there are seekers in the 25-45 age group who would find the United Church attractive if they knew about it

These are signs of our times, as is a spiritual hunger that has people looking for meaning in various spiritual practices and parts of other world religions. In Luke’s Gospel today, Jesus pointedly asks “You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

It is the individual congregations that must discern for themselves the signs of the time. Is your church holding its own? Is there energy for mission? Are the people able to talk about their faith, to relate it to others?

Dealing with change in our congregations

5 stages: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance.

What are the 'things essential'?

Rev. Bob Wallace – two poles:

1. The earliest creed of the Christian Church, 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.
2. A profound conviction about the pastoral care of its people as precious children of a loving God.

The first needs some unpacking, especially in light of the inter-faith dialogue we share with other religions. As Christians, we hold that the revelation of God in Jesus is a gift to us and we are called to follow the way of Jesus. The implications of that revelation have to be worked out by each generation of Christians for their own time and place. It always requires that we live lives that are justice seeking, merciful and humble.

The second is truly characteristic of this church. You, like my own congregation, care for people, young and old. We have to ensure that we keep this as job one. It's easy enough to get busy with other committee work or projects or other-

"Things secondary" (not Unimportant, things we have freedom to do in our own way)

Committees

Style of worship

Numbers

Physical Building

Music

The United Church of Canada can see itself in the words of Jesus we heard today. Even in its birth it caused divisions. In my memory the ordination of homosexual people caused rifts. Then Bill Phipps was interviewed by the Ottawa Citizen and the headlines read "Leader of the United church says Jesus is not God". Our call for a just settlement for both Israelis and Palestinians has landed us in hot water. Support for equal marriage and for native land settlements has rankled some members. I believe that all these positions come from a passion for love, for change, for justice, for renewal, for the Kingdom of God. In another generation, we may find we missed the mark on some of our positions. That is always a risk – we may be wrong.

It's my guess that we will have to keep risking and bear the cost.
In 1988, a Saskatchewan minister predicted that his church would be OK
in 1988, after the turmoil on Ordination of homosexuals. He said
"We've survived terrible droughts and student ministers from the east,
we'll survive this too."

Peter Short, 38th Moderator, Opening Worship, 39th General Council
"We're living history, we're making history, and one day, dearly beloved in
Christ, we'll all be history. But today we live. The church may be
many generations old but it is only one generation deep. Today we
are the living ones whose hearts and hands make the gospel of this
United church live."