
25 years of faith
Martin Grove United Church
October 25, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Sirach 35:12-17 and Luke 18:9-14

So - this is our 25th anniversary. There really isn't much to say except, "Congratulations!". But I don't think that lunch is ready yet, so perhaps I need to say just a bit more than that. Perhaps I need to unpack why we need to celebrate. Perhaps I need to unpack what there is to celebrate. At the very least, I need to keep talking until lunch is ready.

I'd like to begin by stealing some material I often use at funerals. These words speak of the value of life. Usually, the words refer to individual people, but I invite us to hear these words as they apply to this congregation:

"Life is a journey that takes us:

- from youth to age
- from innocence to awareness
- from ignorance to knowledge
- from foolishness to wisdom.
- From weakness to strength, and often back again.
- From offence to forgiveness,
- from loneliness to friendship,
- from fear to faith,
- from defeat to victory and from victory to defeat.

Until looking backward or ahead we see that victory in life does not lie at some high point along the way, but in having made the journey, step by step in the company of those we love and care about."

Is it just me, or does that sound a lot like Martin Grove United Church. A place where loneliness can lead to friendship. A place where offence can lead to forgiveness. A place where fear can lead to faith. A place where defeat can lead to victory. A place where our congregational life is defined by the fact that we love and care about each other in

meaningful ways. Or - put more simply - that Martin Grove United Church is that place where we share the journey of life together, and that is enough.

As far as I know, Martin Grove has not produced any moderators, we have not established ourselves as a spiritual healing centre in North West Toronto, I do not have a hot-line to Justine Trudeau, the Pope does not come here for pastoral care or for advice on how to run a healing circle. Meghan Markle has never come to a UCW meeting to learn how to make tea properly. Gordon Ramsey does not come to our pancake supper to learn how to make pancakes. We are not famous in any sense of the word. What we do have here - what we have always had here - are our relationships, our caring, our love. And that sounds like success in life to me. I think that is what has always mattered here at Martin Grove - our relationships. We have not done a lot of things that other people would read about in the news. But the things we have done we have done in the company of those we love and those we care about.

To me, that is what Martin Grove United Church is all about. After lunch we will have some letters and speeches from former and current members and ministers - and they may share different views, or they might support mine. Either way, I can't wait to hear those stories myself.

When I started to prepare for this service, I was struggling to imagine what scripture readings would really work. But - believe it or not - the lectionary dropped appropriate readings right into our laps. Consider the reading from Sirach which included this line, "do not rely on dishonest sacrifice". I don't recall a single story - nor has it been my experience to observe - any dishonest sacrifices here. This congregation excels in honesty, and that gets expressed here in many ways, which speak of dignity and love. We are brutally honest, which is too bad really, because if we were less honest we could probably make a lot more money. But the virtue of being honest is its own reward, and we would not have it any other way here.

And our reading from Luke is even more provocative and appropriate for us here at Martin Grove United Church, the very classic story of the pharisee and the tax collector. The parable contrasts the attitude of a self-righteous pharisee and a tax collector. In the story the pharisee spends most of his time telling God - and everyone

who will listen - how wonderful he is. The tax collector, on the other hand, approaches God with an attitude of humility and deep concern. The pharisee acts like a big shot. The tax collector acts like a person who knows that life is hard and that being a good person is not all that easy. The tax collector understands that living faithfully requires openness, vulnerability, and sacrifice, to walk with God in our midst. And in the end, it is the humble who are justified, while the self-justified are ... well, let's just say that they miss the whole point of the journey of faith.

And Martin Grove United Church is a place of a certain amount of humility. I've been in churches that thought they were oh so very special. But here at Martin Grove, we excel at being normal. We delight in being not special at all. We are far more like the tax collector in the parable than we are like the pharisee. Thanks be to God for that.

And I'd like to add my personal observation that the people here at Martin Grove United Church are resilient, faithful, and durable. And I say that because after being here for almost exactly 4 years I know a bit about your past. In particular, I know a few things about the parade of ministers we have had here. And when I reflect on the different ministers you have had, I wonder in amazement how you were able to maintain your identity as ministers came and went. Ministers who differed vastly in style, in approach, and even in theology. Some of the pastoral transitions you have been through must have been like changing gears without a clutch. Perhaps even changing direction too, without a clutch. Your ability to endure your ministers and thrive is a testament to your durability and your faith. Today is truly a celebration of 25 years of faith.

I want to close by inviting us into an experiment. I invite each of us to take just a moment and to reflect on everything in your life that has brought you to be in this sanctuary today. I'm pretty sure none of us were born in this sanctuary so we must have come from somewhere. Go back in your mind to where you were born, and reflect on the life events that have brought you to be sitting here today. Take a moment to reflect on your life [30 seconds].

And from all of the strands that make up our lives God has called us together now to be Martin Grove United Church. Some people here may consider themselves part of our collective past. Some people here may consider themselves part of our present. And

there may even be some new souls here today hoping to make themselves part of our future. But from all these strands of life, right now, we are all together. Our past, present, and future blend into who we are right here. Right now. We are all Martin Grove United Church. Thanks be to God.

Amen.