
Winds of Change
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
March 8, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 3:1-17

I want to start with just one question. Did everything really go crazy in the last little while? Maybe I didn't understand all of the complex issues in the news, but what I've been reading about is the demise of an old, established Canadian institution. A long-standing institution is changing - an institution that provides comfort to many Canadians. For many people, it's sort of the backbone of our social structure. This institution defines our social reality, or at least it used to.

The institution provides a place to rest, to get away from the cares of the world. People even go there as a sort of community centre. People are fed and refreshed. It's one of those institutions where when you are on a trip across the country, and you come to a new town, you just know for sure that you can find a local congregation of this institution. And when you do find it, you fit right in. Your expectations are met. You feel right at home. You can count on this institution to provide you with a place where you can always find someone to visit with and relax.

Now - you don't think I'm talking about the church do you? No, I'm talking about an organization that impacts the lives of more Canadians every week than ... possibly any other. I'm talking about my other favourite church - Tim Hortons!

Because what I've been reading about Tim Hortons is that they want to change things around. Marc Caira, their CEO recently said, "we're going to be bold; we're going to be different; we're going to be daring."¹ They want to change customer's ordering habits. That's fine of course - unless they want to change MY ordering habits. And horror of horrors, they are even talking about providing speedier service. Have they gone completely nuts? Part of the "Tim Hortons experience" is making new friends while I wait to order. I don't want speedier service! What drugs are those bean-counters on? Besides, I didn't give them my permission to change things. Surely - as a Canadian - I

¹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/tim-hortons-to-open-800-stores-under-new-strategy/article17078297/>

have a right to my traditions - even if they no longer make financial sense. Surely - as a Canadian - I have a right to my traditions even if they make no sense at all.

Pardon my rant, but I was channeling for Nicodemus there, and imagining what he would feel at the prospect of Tim Hortons - or the equivalent institution of his day - changing. Because Nicodemus doesn't seem to like change either.

Nicodemus is an interesting character. He does not appear in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke - he only makes an appearance in the gospel of John - actually, he makes 3 appearances. His first appearance is in the story we read this morning, where Nicodemus comes to visit with Jesus at night to discuss faith. The second time that Nicodemus appears is in chapter 7, when Nicodemus appeals to the chief priests and the pharisees suggesting that they let Jesus speak in his own defence before they condemn Jesus to judgement. The third time that Nicodemus appears is in chapter 19, when Nicodemus brings spices and perfume to embalm Jesus's body.

Perhaps as we approach Holy Week and Easter, we will hear more of Nicodemus's story. But in today's story, Nicodemus - a pharisee - comes to speak with Jesus at night. We can only imagine that Nicodemus came at night because he wasn't keen for any of his own people to see him visiting the religious outcast, Jesus. The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus was perhaps a meeting of the minds - a meeting between two Jewish teachers. But two teachers with very different perspectives.

Nicodemus, like most pharisees, was stuck in a religious system that rewarded stability, traditional thinking, and static beliefs. Tradition is fine as far as it goes, but strict adherence to tradition leaves no room for following the spirit. And during their meeting Jesus tells Nicodemus - reminds him really - that following the spirit always takes us away from “safe waters”, and into the unknown.

Now - you probably think I'm going to extend that analogy to our own church. That I'm going to bring that tension between following traditions and embracing the new life of the spirit into the present tense in our own congregation. Well, you are wrong. I'm going to talk about babies.

I have a question for all the parents present today. And if you are not a parent, I hope you can imagine along with us. The question is this. Why on earth did you decide to

have children? Now I know that some families happen by accident, but for many parents - including Marjorie and myself - parenthood was a relatively conscious decision.

Now, I love my family, and I love having a family, but the *decision* to have a family was basically illogical. Because choosing to become a parent means choosing to go from a safe, controlled, predictable life to a life that is almost the complete opposite. Becoming a parent is a trip into the unknown. This trip into the unknown was expressed well in a Calvin and Hobbes joke where the parents are sleeping and baby Calvin starts crying. And the father goes into Calvin's room, returns, and says to his wife, "There is a small cranky stranger in the next room demanding food, shelter, and a university education. What shall we do?"

When you choose to have children through birth, you make that decision without knowing the temperament of the person you will be with, possibly for a very long time. You make a commitment to a stranger, and you make a commitment to learn to live with whatever you get.

How often have you watched a football game, and watched some massive linebacker - with a nickname like "tank" - and asked yourself, where did *he* come from? Because it is almost impossible for us to believe that such people come from little babies. It's the same question with many people. Where do criminals come from? Where do serial killers come from? Where did mother Teresa come from? Where did Gandhi come from? Where did Jesus come from? Babies.

When we choose to have a baby we really do not have any idea what we are getting into. And yet for myself - and for most people - that voyage into unknown waters by choosing to have children is a good voyage. It is worth it. Most parents say they would not want to have missed the journey. And even though I am arguing that the journey is into unknown waters, the journey is rooted in love, we at least know that.

I believe that is the sort of journey that Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into. A voyage into unknown waters. A voyage into the uncontrollable - but rooted in spirit and love. A voyage to leave familiar traditions - not to get away from them so much as to be open and free to accept new life in new forms. New forms that we just might not see if we are too busy following our traditions.

All right - so now I am talking about our church. You caught me. Jesus said, “the spirit blows where it chooses, and you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” That's the spirit all right. Uncontrolled. Unpredictable. Raw. Power.

And those spirit winds are the winds of change that we feel all around us. What do we make of that? What do we want to do when we feel the winds of change around you? Do we want to hide from that wind? If so, then we should hunker down, build shelters and wind breaks, get some emergency rations, stay low, and just try to hold on and survive. What's the alternative, anyway?

The alternative is to realize that the winds of change are from God, and therefore are to be embraced, harnessed, enjoyed. The winds of the spirit are to be witnessed, called out, honoured. The alternative to building walls to block the wind is to build windmills and to draw strength and power from the movement of the spirit. We can hide from the winds of change, or we can embrace the energy in that wind and live into new life.

Of course, that would mean letting go of control. Because the winds of change will push us into our unknown future, not back to our known past. But we don't need to worry. These winds are from God so we can embrace them as we continue on our new journey. And like the journey of having children, it will be a journey that we would not want to miss. I just claimed now that we do not have to fear the winds of change because they are from God. But that is only true as we all - together - participate in this journey. One person will not be driving the journey. It will take all of us to vision, to hope, to dream, and to act.

But - I hear you ask - what will this journey of change look like? Well, I don't know, but between us all together, we are going to figure that out. As one step along the way, over the next 4 weeks, we will engage in some simple activities to start to tease out a sense of what our journey might look like. I think that most of these activities will take place over coffee, downstairs. But today's activities will happen here. Actually - no time like the present - let's do it right now! Here we go!

Everyone has been given 2 sticky-notes. Everyone is invited to use 1 note to answer each of 2 questions. At the end of the service, please place your notes on the bristle boards that are at the back of the sanctuary. There is 1 bristle board for each

question. We will integrate all of your input into our ongoing process that is happening over the next 4 weeks. Now - are you ready for the questions?

- What is it about SHUC that you cherish or value?
- What hopes or ideas or dreams do you have for SHUC?

I'll just give us a moment to reflect on our answers.

Your answers to these 2 questions will help shape the journey ahead. It is important to know what it is that is part of our core identity that we do not want to change and also to know what healthy and progressive changes will help us live forwards.

The winds from the spirit are not tame or controllable. But we know one thing. The winds of change that bring change into our lives are rooted in spirit and in love. The winds are from the spirit. The winds are of the spirit. The winds are the spirit.

Let's embrace the winds of change.

Amen.