
Commitment
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
Sept 18, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

This week we continue our 5-week series on themes related to stewardship. Last week we discussed gratitude. And this week we discuss commitment. And in case you missed last week, this series is adapted from a 5-week program provided by the United Church of Canada. And I am very grateful to the outreach committee for helping bring this series to life. Which is only fair, because they requested it!

To begin, I must confess that I am a bit confused by the theme for this week: “commitment”. In the UCC materials, they present commitment as if it is a virtue. Something desirable. Something admirable. And of course, that is often the case.
[image: wionews indian doctor]

This week the Indian news stream World Is One News featured a story of a doctor in India who got stuck in traffic on his way to the hospital so he abandoned his car and ran for 45 minutes in order to be on time to perform a surgery. That’s commitment, right? And that is a good thing. And I’m sure we can all think of stories where a person went above and beyond because they were committed.

But I think there must be more to the idea of “commitment” than that. When I used to visit inmates in prison, many of them were highly committed to lifestyles that I considered socially dysfunctional if not downright sociopathic. Much closer to home, you may remember early on in the pandemic there were protesters at Colbourne and Clarence with signs that said things like “the government is not essential” as well as other slogans I will not repeat here. Whatever you thought of their messages, we cannot deny that those people who stood there in all weathers were highly committed. I’m pretty sure that Vladimir Putin is very committed - I’m just not sure to what exactly.

[image: I’m not stubborn]

Being committed might be a good thing. But being committed might also mean a stubborn refusal to accept reality for what it is. Some people we might call committed we

might instead call stubborn, people who refuse to listen to input from other people. And in that context, being “committed” is not really a good thing.

So - is commitment good or bad? It depends on what we are committed to. Which leads me to the question I want to ask today. As individuals - and as a congregation - who are we committed to being? And - as individuals and as a congregation - what are we committed to doing? Or in plain English - who are we? Who are we, ... really?

[image: commitment is an act, not a word]

And to at least partially answer this question, this week we have another guest. A local expert on commitment. Verna, come on down!

Paul: Verna, what does commitment mean to you? And do you have a story to share with us about commitment?

Verna: Same questions to you, Paul.

[image: commitment and mood]

I suppose for me commitment means doing something because that’s who you are, even if the task in question has become less convenient. Commitment is about us - not the situation. As the famous author unknown once said, “commitment is doing the thing you said you were going to do long after the mood you said it in has left you.”

Thank you Verna. Do you want to stand there for my story?

Sometimes when we talk about commitment, we get the idea that more is better. But I think we need to be realistic. Let me tell you a story. When I first came to Brantford, after about 3 weeks I participated a workshop at a Lutheran church and learned about Naloxone.

[image: naloxone kit]

If you don’t know, Naloxone is a fast-acting drug used to temporarily reverse the effects of opioid overdoses. When used at the right time, it saves lives. At the workshop we learned about opioids, and how and when to use Naloxone if we saw a person suffering from an opioid overdose. At the time, Brantford had the 2nd highest per capita opioid overdose rates in Canada. For me the workshop was a real “Welcome to Brantford” moment. Coming to Brantford from Rexdale, that made me feel more at home actually.

Anyway, after that workshop, I spoke with a number of people in this congregation. I wanted to get a sense of whether or not anyone in this congregation cares about the people who use opioids. And in very short summary. I did find a few people who told me they cared about the people who use opioids. But none of them actually wanted to go downtown or were willing to actually interact with people who use opioids. So we have not really done anything. And I fully respect people who do not feel safe in certain environments. I would not criticize any of you (I cannot remember who I spoke with) because of your sense of safety.

But I was also a bit troubled. If we don't want to go downtown, fine. But then we need to take our passion and compassion and pick a different issue to work on. We need to pick an issue that we ARE willing to work with. Yes, we need to be realistic about our abilities and our fears. But we need to be doing things for our community. Things that matter. It does not have to be people who use opioids. It can be seniors, or children, or even simply lonely, isolated people. There are enough needs to go around these days. Trust me on that.

I like to visualize this with my hands. On the one hand, we have our own passions and abilities. On the other hand, we have the needs of the community. And where those two intersect, then that is where we need to put our effort. If we guilt ourselves into working on an issue that nobody wants to work on, it will fail. If put our efforts into an issue that nobody cares about, it won't matter. We need to put our efforts on the intersection: that place where we are willing to engage and where there are real needs to be met.

[image: Martin Luther king jr]

To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., "If we can not fly, then run. If we can not run, then walk. If we can not walk, then crawl. But by all means, keep moving."

To me, commitment means that we keep moving. If reality changes - like with covid - then we make changes. We take our programs online or whatever makes sense. But we keep moving towards being and bringing the kingdom of God in our midst.

[image: chicken or pig?]

I suppose this is as good a time as any to explain this week's image. The image

offers a choice. Chicken or pig? What on earth does that have to do with commitment? Perhaps you are thinking that Rev. Paul should be committed. And I will confess that the image this week is perhaps a bit too opaque.

So what do you think of the image? What do you think you are choosing? Do you think you are being asked to select your next pet? Do you think you are being asked which one you want to eat? Well, no. The question is actually - which one are you? Are you a chicken or a pig? And that question is in the context of commitment. Is that clear now No? I guess we need one more image to make this clear.

[image: bacon and eggs]

Think about bacon and eggs. Or better yet, think about getting the ingredients to make bacon and eggs if you live on a farm. In order to get an egg, you have to force a chicken to give you an egg. But in order to get bacon, you have to force a pig to give you its life. In terms of your breakfast, the chicken is involved. But the pig is committed.

[image: involved vs committed]

So which are you? Are you a chicken or a pig? Think about your own involvement in this church, or in the wider community? Or even think about how this church engages with the wider community. Are we just involved in our community? Or are we committed to our community?

How do we tell the difference? I would love to hear a lively conversation about this over coffee time today. But here are some clues:

If we are only involved, then likely we only engage when it is easy and when there is no real cost to ourselves. And if reality changes, we might just throw up our hands and say, "I guess we need to just stop what we are doing".

If we are committed, then likely we engage because it is simply who we are. And if there are costs along the way, well, we just let it work out. If reality changes and our methods need to change, we just do it. Because we are committed to working towards the outcome.

So what do you think? Who are we here at SHUC? Are we involved or are we committed?

This question is not just theoretical. During announcements this morning I told

you that on Sept 28 we are going to get a presentation from a United Church corporation called “Kindred Works” about a possible option to redevelop our property. I have not seen the proposal myself. But I have worked with corporations like this before to renew church properties. I was the chair of the property commission in South West Presbytery in Toronto for 6 years and we managed a number of renewal projects. What I am expecting during this presentation is a proposal that would add affordable housing to our church property. We would get several things from this: our building would become accessible. We would receive a rental income stream. And, we would be making a contribution to the available pool of affordable housing here in Brantford.

But what would we lose? Our building would change. We could lose our sense of control of the building. We might also lose some spaces within the building.

Which is why it is important that we know who we are committed to being, and what we are committed to doing. What are we committed to here? Are we committed to the building? Are we committed to our ministries? Are we committed to our past? Are we committed to being vital into the future? What are we committed to?

Let me change gears here for a minute.

[image: Christmas tree]

We are currently in the “Season of Creation”. This is the time of the year we are asked to consider “creation” in the sense of our environment, climate change, and other things like that that we do not want to talk about. So I want to talk about trees for a bit.

Trees are interesting for a variety of reasons. For one thing, even though people talk about planting trees all the time, very few people plant trees. If they plant anything, they plant seeds, or they plant saplings. People rarely plant trees. But of course, we do not need to plant trees. We only need to plant saplings and seeds. We generally hold the idea that if we plant saplings, those saplings will become mature trees over time. We plant saplings in the hope that they turn into the thing we actually want. Trees. In other words, it is ok to start small. To do things that are actually doable in the hope that they will grow into the result that we actually want.

[image: everyone wants to park in the shade]

Often we get frustrated with social problems like homelessness because we can

not see how to solve them. But perhaps we do not have to know how to completely solve a social problem that we care about. Perhaps we only need to take a single step in the right direction towards solving that social problem. If people only cared about problems they could solve quickly, nobody would ever plant a tree.

[image: best time to plant a tree]

What's the best time to get started? Well, likely the best time to get started on something that we are committed to was in the past. Perhaps when we had more members, or more energy. Well, we may have missed that. But what's the second best time to get started? Right now.

We need to be realistic about our abilities and our energy. But we need to keep moving. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "But by all means, keep moving".

As individuals - and as a congregation - who are we committed to being? And - as individuals and as a congregation - what are we committed to doing?

I am delighted to keep moving with you all.

Amen.