
Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
November 13, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 and John 2:1–11

Before we begin, let me ask you something. Why did you come to church today? And why did you come to this church? Did you come because it is a habit? Is it a tradition that you adopted from your parents? Did you come here because of ties and friendships with others people here? Did you come because it's just far easier than thinking of something else to do on a Sunday morning? Are you perhaps here for the first time and hoping for something? Perhaps you are not even sure what you are looking for? But you are looking. Did you come here to learn? Did you come here to connect? Did you come here to find healing? Did you come here to find peace? Did you come here to be transformed? Did you come here to be part of the transformation of the world that is happening all around us?

Now I realize that was a lot of options. And I may not even have mentioned why it is that you yourself came here today. I am glad you are here - regardless of why you are here or how often you come here or whether you are in person or online.

But having said that, this year the national church came up with a new vision and purpose statement which the church hopes that we will want to live into. The statement is about what you might hope to find in a church. In this church. The statement may or may not match why you came here today. And I hope that leads to great conversations over coffee time today.

[image: propeller]

It is a statement that may propel us to the year 2025 - which will be the 100th anniversary of the United Church of Canada. It is a statement that may propel us in new directions. Or - a statement that will just gather dust. It is up to us. Because it depends on whether or not we are hoping to be propelled at all. Which is why I opened by inviting you to reflect on why you are here. Are you interested in being propelled in new directions? And I ask you that both as individual people, and as a congregation? Does the

prospect of “being propelled” sound exciting to you? Or does it just make you want to run and hide.

[image: 1970’s kitchen]

And that is not an idle question. In a former congregation, a member came up to me once and reflected on how many things had changed over the course of his lifetime. But then he said something I did not expect. He told me that since everything in society was changing, he came to that church to help him pretend that he was still living in the past. For one hour every week, this person pretended it was still the 1970s. He was very clear when he told me that if the rest of the world has to change, fine, but his church must be that one place that never changes. Interestingly, he love my preaching and even most of the music I picked. I share that story today because I want you to know that I do not assume that everybody in a church wants change. Not everybody wants to be “propelled” at all. That is a decision that each of us gets to make for ourselves. And it is a decision that we get to make as a congregation.

[image: propeller]

Now, if you have been paying attention this year, this statement from national is not exactly news. We showed a video that featured the statement earlier this year. Yvonne used the statement as a springboard to her devotional at the worship meeting this week. So the new statement is “in the air”. But I hear you. Enough preamble already. Do you want to hear the statement?

[image: Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice]

The short version is a slogan. “Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice”. The slightly longer version is, “Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.”

[image: Bold. Connected. Evolving. Diverse. Courageous. Hope-filled]

I’m going to read some of those adjectives again. And I invite us to consider which of these words apply to you. Which words apply to this church? Which words excite you? Bold. Connected. Evolving. Diverse. Courageous. Hope-filled. I hope that at least some of those words sound like where you want to go. Because the only way for the

church to be like that is for us to be like that.

[image: Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice]

So what does this statement mean? The statement contains three phrases.

- Deep spirituality
- Bold discipleship
- Daring justice

Of course, there are wildly different ideas of what the word “spirituality” means. And for most of us, there is a lot of overlap between these concepts. Even the United Church documentation smushes the concepts of spirituality, discipleship, and justice together. But I figure - that’s ok. If we are living authentic lives then the three concepts do likely overlap.

But, for the purpose of discussion, I will try to present the concepts in separate ways. And I will fail. But I don’t care if I fail in that task. Because the purpose of talking about faith is not to talk about faith. It is about how we live our lives.

[image: spiritually -> feelings, discipleship -> thoughts, justice -> actions]

Here is one lens that might be helpful:

- Spirituality has to do with what we feel.
- Discipleship has to do with what we think.
- Justice has to do with how we act.

That is probably wrong. But I hope it is at least a helpful framework.

So what is meant by “deep spirituality”? This ties in with our feelings. The United Church documentation says, “What our new mission statement says is that this experience of intimacy with God is the starting point for each of us. It is grounded in worship and prayer, study and scripture. Deep spirituality is the joy of those who know they are loved and held by God and who long to run into God’s embrace. Deep spirituality is the cornerstone of our identity, not just as a church but also as individuals”.

[image: connected]

As with most United Church documents, I find them helpful, but often, they do not go far enough. Certainly, spirituality is about feeling connected. But I think that at it’s deepest level, spirituality is about feeling at home. At home in the widest sense that we

can imagine. That can mean feeling connected to God, or feeling connected to each other, or feeling connected to the cosmos, or perhaps to something else. Feeling connected is very important. We need to feel connected in order to feel at home. We need to feel connected because we need to experience belonging. We all need to know that we belong.

Deep spirituality means that we ourselves are willing to work to find ways feel connected. If that happens in a quiet church, sitting on a pew with your eyes closed and hands folded, that's great. It if happens in the middle of Union Station surrounded by frantic commuters, that's great too. And yes, Union Station in Toronto used to be one of my sanctuaries.

Spirituality is a very broad concept. But Deep spirituality I think always requires one key element.

[image: people watching Marjorie cross a river]

Consider this scenario. You are at home now watching something on TV. It's a new show to you, and you are giving it your full attention. Or perhaps - like in this image - you are watching Marjorie cross a river with her bicycle and you are not sure she is going to make it. You share in her peril. You care about what happens. Your feet might even feel cold from the water.

[image: excited people watching tv]

The point is that you are not just watching TV. You are engaging with the characters on the screen. You are feeling what the characters are feeling. You find yourself rooting for a particular outcome as if you are personally involved. Because you are involved. You are engaged. You are connected. You are impacted. You are involved.

[image: bored person watching tv]

Now consider a different scenario. You are at home now watching something on TV. Or perhaps you are just channel surfing. But you are not really involved. You do not honestly care about the characters. You are not feeling what the characters are feeling. You are not impacted. You are not really connected. You are just not involved.

Two people can have the exact same experience - like watching TV. But those two people can have completely different reactions. One person can be fully engaged and involved, while the other person is basically not really there.

[image: connected]

Spirituality works the same way. Deep spirituality requires that we are connected, engaged, and willing to let our feelings be moved. Spiritual practices both allow and require that we are emotionally fully present in the moment.

In other words, spirituality is not a spectator sport. Spiritual practices requires our full individual participation. In fact, some spiritual practices involve simply being fully present in the moment. Fully connected. Fully engaged.

One common spiritual practice here in the church is prayer. And for me, prayer is not a spectator sport. This is why during our “prayers of the people” I leave space for your own prayers to be voiced. For me, “prayers of the people” are not “prayers of the minister”. They are prayers for the whole people. I provide a framework for the prayers and some words, but all of us together provide the “content”. During prayers of the people, if there is a prayer that you think needs to be voiced, then voice it. Do not expect me to do all the talking. Prayer is not a spectator sport. For corporate prayer to “work”, people need to be engaged, connected, involved, present in the moment. And of course, voicing your prayers silently is just fine too. The point is that when we do prayers of the people, you are not just listening to me pray. We are all in the prayer together. I encourage all of us to find our own voice in those prayers.

I know that for some of you, this is not exactly how you want the prayers to look. I hope that over time you will come to appreciate the gift of this type of prayer. And if not, I wish you better luck with your next minister. But for me - prayer is not a spectator sport.

One spiritual practice I am really enjoying these days is our drum circle. It is such a gift to be in an open circle where people come and go as they please. And while we are together, our drumming connects us together in meaningful ways. When someone joins the circle, it all changes. When someone leaves, it changes again. Our drum circle is one of many places where I feel home and I find belonging. And so do others in the circle.

I want to show a short video with segments from 2 circles. Thanks to Bob MacMillian and Roger for the videos.

[video: drum circle]

You can see that we greet people in the park, we find our own voice (with drums). There is drumming, but there is also conversation, and quite a bit of laughter too. And Cory summarized the whole experience when he said that we lift the mood and the energy at Victoria Park - which percolates into the surrounding buildings too. The court house loves us and even open their windows so they can hear us better.

And I just need to share my favourite photo of this week.

[image: Cory running across market street with a chair over his head]

This week at drum circle, one of the TD employees - Cory - was standing in the sunshine. But when I caught his eye, I seduced him into coming into our circle. I gave him my chair and my drum. Then, I sat beside him, on the grass, with a small djembe. Cory's face just lit up when he played. After a moment, he sprang to his feet and declared that I should have a chair too. So he sprinted across Market Street, went into the bank, and returned ... running across Market St ... with a chair over his head. I was so involved in the moment that I did not get a photo - but I got a photo of him when he went back to the bank later. But the gift of an open circle in an open park is simply amazing. Our community is longing for connection, longing for home. Longing for be-longing. And we as a church can help people find that. We as a church can find that for ourselves too. If you want to see deep spirituality, come to Victoria Park to see it, hear it, and feel it in your soul. Come home.

[image: connected]

I frequently hear people bemoaning the fact that we do not have a lot of younger people in this congregation. I find that people of all ages easily connect with spiritual practices. Sitting down for an hour in a quiet building to hear a boring sermon ... not so much. The call from the national church is for us to embrace and pursue the spiritual dimensions of our faith - and there are many of them. Since I've been here we've done many spiritual practices: mindfulness, mediation, grieving circles, forgiveness circles, drum circles, special events like Maundy Thursday.... And those gatherings ALWAYS include members of this congregation as well as others who long for home. People who long for be-longing.

Some people say "Go big or go home". With spirituality I say "Go deep in order

to find home”.

I was planning to discuss spirituality, discipleship and justice today. But I got a bit carried away with spirituality. It’s an occupational hazard. And I left out many many examples of spiritual practices. So we will discuss the other topics over time. But I hope you know we have already been - and will continue to - live into them anyway.

Spirituality: Go deep in order to find home.

Amen.