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United we ... keep uniting!  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
June 9, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Samuel 8:4-20

I hope you like birthdays! Pentecost, which we celebrated recently, is traditionally taken to be the birthday of Christianity. And today, June 9, is the birthday of the United Church of Canada. Well, the actual date is tomorrow, June 10, but who's counting.

June 10, 1925 was the day of the inauguration service of the United Church, held at Mutual Street Arena in Toronto. That's the day that the United Church of Canada formally came into being. It was created as an amalgamation of congregations from the former Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches.

The lectionary that we follow is created by international bodies. So we would not expect the lectionary to recognize the birthday of our own national church. However, I was surprised to discover that our reading from 1 Samuel this morning is actually fits quite well with the creation of the United Church. Because the story in 1 Samuel that we read is all about a group of people deciding how they should organize themselves for success.

But perhaps I need to backtrack a bit first. We sometimes think of the Old Testament as "the Jewish Bible". But the Old Testament gives a broader story than that. In very broad terms, early writings in the Old Testament speak about individual people like Cain and Noah. Later stories speak about patriarchs, like Abraham. Later writings are about people called "Hebrews". Even later, we have people called "Israelites". And then later, tribes. And then later, judges. And later, kings. And then a single kingdom, and finally, we read about divided kingdoms. The Old Testament was written during the Babylonian exile. And it is only after that time that we have people who would have called themselves "Jews".

The piece of that story that we read today is about the transitional period between the time of the judges and the time of kings. What was that all about? It was about how to organize a group of people most effectively for survival.

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The judges were power people - they had their own dominions - they each had their own power structures. Sort of like feudal lords. But compared to other groups in the same geographic area, each judge had quite limited resources. And in particular, limited military resources. So the decision to have a king for Israel was essentially a decision to create a unified military force. That combined force would be more powerful than the military force of any one of the judges individually.

Essentially, the choice was between remaining separate - and therefore smaller and less powerful. Or coming together as a group to become more powerful. The decision to have a king “like the other nations” was a reflection of the decision that collective power was more important than local autonomy. At least at that time and in that place. It was a decision to work together for a larger common good. It was a decision that sharing between friends was better than being overthrown by an enemy.

And now, that starts to sound a bit more like church union in 1925. Church union was all about sharing resources to provide a better base from which to launch Christian missions. The issue in 1925 was not about military power of course, it was about the resources and the people to do the work of the church. But of course, actual history is much more interesting than that.

I want to share a quote from United Church minister, Rev. Ken Gallinger, who I knew in Richmond Hill. “Arguably the greatest single driving force behind the birth of The United Church in 1925 was a man named Rev. Dr. Samuel Dwight Chown.

Chown was the Superintendent of Missions for the Methodist Church in Canada, and as such he travelled widely across the country, tirelessly proclaiming the virtues of uniting with Presbyterians and Congregationalists to create a new church. So effective was his work that, within the Methodist Church, the final vote to abolish their beloved Methodist nametag and enter the new denomination was over 6:1 in favour - an incredible accomplishment given that in most church circles it’s hard to get a 51% vote to change the paint colour. Now, the Methodist Church was by far the largest single player in the union process, so it was widely assumed that Chown would be the Moderator of the new church - by many people that was simply taken for granted. Meanwhile, the Union process in the Presbyterian Church had been much more difficult; there had been

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much organized opposition, and if church people in general are slow to change, church people with a Scottish background are best described as glacial. So the vote in the Presbyterian Church had been much closer, with a full third deciding to stay out of the new denomination. Chown watched the anguish of the Presbyterians with much sadness, and decided that something must be done.

So, on the eve of the founding convention and the first General Council of the United Church of Canada, Chown withdrew as a candidate for Moderator, and threw his support behind the Presbyterian leader, Dr George Pidgeon. Pidgeon was unanimously elected, and because of Chown's great generosity the new denomination set off with a spirit of unity that might very well have otherwise eluded it.

There can be no unity in the church when everyone is simply looking after themselves, trying to get their own needs met, pursuing their own agendas. It really is as simple as that. A unified church is a place where people look after each other - not ignoring their own needs, but always understanding those needs in the larger context of the community and the world. By naming ourselves, in our logo, to be "united", we are reminding ourselves that this is the kind of place we want to be, and inviting those who are looking for that kind of church, to join us."

Of course, it's easy to just say that amalgamations are a good idea. That we are stronger when we work together, etc. But amalgamations also mean a loss of autonomy. A loss of our own ability to decide what we want to do. A loss of our own ability to decide who we want to be. That is always the struggle.

In 1 Samuel, the Hebrew people were struggling with that decision. They were worried about the loss of autonomy. In 1925 the United Church struggled with it too. With the result that a full one third of the Presbyterian congregations in Canada did not join church union. Because they felt that autonomy and identity were more important to them than union. There were also some theological differences. The most notable being that the UCC did not affirm a particular stance called "double predestination". That was a sticking point for some of the Presbyterians. But the whole issue of strength through numbers versus autonomy was the driving factor that prevented full union.

And today, it seems that we actually face the same decision again. Do we value

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our own autonomy more than our ability to pursue the mission that we are called to serve? The age of Christendom is long over. How do we move on? Do we need to find new partners to work with? Do we just try to tough it out? What do we do?

This is a time for new leadership and direction. Amy Edmondson, professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School believes that current leadership needs to take 5 steps:

- We all need to be part of the conversation, so we all need to speak up for what we believe - we need honest, direct, communication.
- We all need to be part of the conversation, so we all need to listen intensely to each other - to understand each other, our ideas and our concerns.
- We need to integrate the different points of view that we hear - including both challenges and opportunities.
- We need to experiment - iteratively. To avoid the extreme of over-analyzing our situation while also avoiding the other extreme of taking very risky leaps.
- And finally, we need to reflect on those experiments, and to have open conversation about how things are going for each of us.

Church union in 1925 was partly about optimizing the use of Christian resources to do Christian mission. It was about reducing duplication of effort. But it was more than that. It was about developing the strength and vitality that comes from embracing people who are a bit different from us. Of working with people who are not exactly like us. Of hearing the voices of others. Of doing Edmondson's 5 points actually. And today, as we struggle as a shrinking denomination, we are invited to keep doing those 5 things. Or perhaps to start doing them again. Are you ready to change? Are you ready to innovate? Are you ready to embrace new ministry partners? Are you ready to become something we are not already? We united before. Are you interested in uniting again?

Our UCC crest gives us clues towards that. Or, I should say, in our crests. Did you know that we have had 3 United Church crests over the years?

Quiz: what year was the first crest adopted (answer, 1944).

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The open Bible represents the Congregation churches. The dove representing the spirit is a link to our Methodist past. The burning bush reminds us of our Presbyterian heritage. And the latin “ut omnes unum sint”, which means, “that all may be one” speaks to our drive not only to unite once in 1925, but to continue to unite with others today. The alpha and omega, representing the beginning and end of the alphabet, speak to the constancy of God.

And the “X” is not just a graphic to divide the space, it is really the greek letter Chi, the first letter of the word “Christ” when written in Greek.

When was that crest changed? And why?

It was changed in 1980 to add the words “L’eglise Unie du Canada”, and the whole graphic was modernized.

When was the crest changed again? And why?

In 2012, the crest was changed by adding the four colours of the medicine wheel. And adding the Mohawk phrase, “Akse Nia’Tetewa:neren”, which means “all my relations”. It's an indigenous phrase about the value of honouring all people. I wonder what the next change will be? Well, I don’t know of course, but we actually got a big clue from our very first moderator, George Pidgeon. Not long after church union, Pidgeon said, “Who is loyal to the past? - The person [man] who preserves its form, or the person [man] who gives liberty to its spirit”.

Our forms - which we have loved and which worked well in the past - are changing - again. Our challenge, according to Pidgeon, is to give liberty to the spirit behind those forms. To preserve not the form itself, but to preserve what is ultimately more important, which is the spirit behind the form. Perhaps in the United Church, we are being called to unite with new partners again. I cannot wait to see what that means.

I find it inspiring that the voices from 1925 still resonate today. But today, I also feel we need a message for 2024. The whole idea of union has changed over the last 99 years too. Moreover, in 1925 the move towards “unity” was in many respects an expectation of moving towards “uniformity”. And that is no longer where most of us want to go. Unity means something completely different now.

Here’s a short thought-experiment. If I told you today that I have been asked to

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perform an inter-faith wedding, what would you think that means? Well, since I am part of it, you probably assume there is 1 Christian involved in the wedding. And the other person is probably Muslim, or Buddhist or from some other faith. That's what an inter-faith marriage means today. Now put your mind back in time about 60 years. What would it have meant 60 years ago if I said I was invited to participate in an inter-faith wedding? It would probably mean a wedding between a person who is a Protestant and a person who is a Roman Catholic. Weddings between protestants and catholics used to be called inter-faith weddings. Our sense of who is "the other" has changed.

So in our society, consider who is it who is like us? And who is not like us? And over the decades, those goal posts have changed. The goal posts have not moved further away, but the posts have moved further apart from each other. Inclusion of others is now considered much more socially acceptable.

I want to try to visualize this with some images. Again, for now, please use your imagination. Picture 2 different jigsaw puzzles - both unfinished - just a pile of pieces. The puzzles represent the church.

One jigsaw puzzle is composed of all green pieces. What are the advantages of that puzzle? For one thing, it is easy to know what the final picture will look like - a green rectangle. It is organized, it is controlled. If there was a stray piece from a different puzzle in the pile you could spot it easily. The puzzle suggests uniformity. Uniformity of culture, music, thinking, food. And what are the disadvantages of that puzzle. It looks boring. I would not buy that puzzle.

The other jigsaw puzzle is just a jumble of colours. You see a pile of pieces that do not seem to be related. And no, there is no picture on the box. What are the disadvantages of this puzzle? It is just a mess. It is disorganized. We have no idea what the final picture will look like. If there was a stray piece from a different puzzle in the pile you would never find it. And what are the advantages? The puzzle looks interesting. It looks like a fun challenge. Because of the vast array of colours, I'm pretty sure that my personal piece will be welcome here. It is a puzzle I would gladly invest my time and effort into. I would make some effort to build that puzzle.

I would invite us all to reflect on those puzzle images and think of our church.

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And yes, I realize my jigsaw analogy is about as subtle as a pair of crutches. But what kind of church do you want to belong to? What sort of church is the United Church of Canada? Do we long for the predictable even if it is boring? Or are we drawn into a state of organic chaos where we do not know what the final picture will be, but we are delighted that there is so much colour, energy, and diversity? Do we long for a church that you know you will fit in because you helped create it. Which church will you gladly invest your energy into?

We are the United Church. But we are also the uniting church. Thanks be to God.  
*Amen.*