
Deep spirituality, Bold discipleship, Daring justice
Chapel in the Park United Church
November 3, 2024
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 people here? Did you come because it's just easier than thinking of something else to do on a Sunday morning? Are you perhaps here for the first time and looking 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 hope? 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 even so 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 physically with us or online.

These questions are important because - from time to time - we need to discuss our identity as a congregation, and as a church. And I want to talk about this today for 2 reasons.

One reason is that over coffee time today, Yolanda and I will be leading a group discussion about our identity. Specifically, we want to discuss being a welcoming church. So over coffee today we will discuss the ways in which we are a welcoming church as well as ways that perhaps we could improve a bit.

The other reason I want to talk about this today is because last year the national church came up with a new vision and purpose statement. And we have not talked about that since I came here almost 1 year ago.

[image: propeller]

The vision statement from head office is a nice, short, statement. It is a statement that may propel us into 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 - it may be 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 loved 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.

[image: propeller]

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: red light]

I hope you all notice my subtle attempt to talk about “being propelled”. Instead of being more direct and talking about change. It can be hard to talk about change in the church. I know the drill. The only time people want change is when we are sitting at a red light.

But in my defence, I did not bring up change today. The subject of change was brought up in our gospel reading. And, I wonder how many of us noticed what it was that changed in our gospel story. You know. The story with the water and the wine.

[ask: in our gospel today, what change did you notice]

Some of you will likely say that the change in the story was obvious. Jesus changed water into wine. And perhaps you even applaud that sort of change. But I think there was a much larger change going on in the story.

[image: change ahead]

Because Jesus did not just change water into wine. He transformed water intended for use in hand-washing into wine. Jesus did not create wine out of thin air. In the story Jesus re-purposed water that was intended to service the traditional ritual of hand-washing. In Jesus's day, of course, hand washing was not done for sanitary reasons. The ritual was followed simply as one of many cultural traditions that tradition dictated must be followed.

So, one way to read this story is to recognize that ritual hand-washing was a tradition. Traditions are things that we do today because we did them yesterday. Following a tradition today is - at some level - about preserving our past. Whereas, providing adequate refreshments at a wedding party is about the present. It's about making new friends. It's about building new relationships. It's about living today. There was a shortage of resources, and Jesus decided that wine was more important than hand-washing. Jesus decided that new relationships were more important than tradition.

If we read the story that way, then we see the story as a battle between the past and the present. A battle between following the rules or creating new relationships. And Jesus responds decisively. When the wine runs out, he doesn't ask the host if they have more wine hidden away. He doesn't ask someone to run out to an off-sale. Jesus - apparently without hesitation except for his dealing with his mother - chooses to honour the present relationships over the past with its rules and traditions.

Jesus chose to let an old tradition slide into the past in order to embrace a new future. I think that is way more impressive change than turning water into wine.

And the new vision statement from the United Church is designed to do the same thing. To help us release our past in order to embrace a new future.

But I hear you. Enough preamble already. Do you want to hear the vision statement?

Actually, let me share a short video from National first.

[image: DBD video from national <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asZ1m26p-oI>]

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

The short version is a slogan. “Deep spirituality, bold discipleship, daring justice”.
The slightly longer version is,

[image: quote below]

“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.”

I’m going to read some of those words again. And I invite us to consider which of these words resonate with 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 who you want to be. 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. The three concepts do overlap.

In any case, here is one way to look at it. One lens that might be helpful.
[image: spiritually -> feelings, discipleship -> thoughts, justice -> actions]

- 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 not correct. 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 feeling connected to ourselves. Or perhaps 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 to feel connected. If that happens for you 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 used to be one of my sanctuaries.

Deep spirituality I think always requires one key element. And I want to unpack that by discussing something I think we can all relate to. Watching television.

[image: bored person watching tv]

Consider this person. They are at home watching something on TV. Or perhaps they are just channel surfing. But they are not really engaged. They look bored. They do not honestly care about the characters in the show they are half-heartedly watching. They are not feeling what the characters are feeling. They are not impacted. They are not really connected. They are just not present, really.

[image: excited person watching tv]

Consider this person. They are deeply engrossed in the show. They care about

what is happening to the characters in the show. You could steal this guy's bowl of popcorn from under his nose and he would not even notice. He is completely absorbed in watching television. He is completely present in the moment.

[image: people watching Marjorie cross a river]

Or consider these people. They are watching Marjorie cross a river with her bicycle while I narrate. And the people watching are not sure she is going to make it. They are cheering her on. They feel Marjorie's peril. Their feet might even feel cold from the rushing water on the screen. They are connected. They care about the outcome.

[image: different people watching tv]

Different people can have the exact same experience - for example watching TV. But those people can have completely different reactions to what they experience. Some people can be completely caught up in the moment, and some people can sleep-walk through the same experience.

That happens in life all the time. But it also happens when we consider spiritual practices.

[image: connected]

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. Some spiritual practices actually only involve simply being fully present in the moment. Fully connected. Fully engaged.

One common spiritual practice here in this church is prayer. And for me, prayer is not a spectator sport. I am delighted that so many different people offer the prayers of the people in this congregation. And when I lead the prayers of the people myself, I always 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. You - the people - are invited to engage. Prayer is not a spectator sport.

One spiritual practice I am really enjoying these days is our fledgling 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.

Many people in our community are 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. I am delighted that members from St Edith Stein participate in our drum circle. We are forging new connections and new relationships. If you've never been to a drum circle, come and join us. Hear it. Feel it. Come home.

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 meditation, 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.

Spirituality: Go deep in order to find home.

Amen.