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Season of Creation  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
September 13, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

I'm delighted to be back, and to see you all again. I hope we all found things to enjoy over the summer. I look forward to hearing about your summer over coffee time today.

The first week back after a break always feels a bit different to me. Some of us have sort of slept through the summer - which is a fine way to relax. But I feel like I need to start with a bit of a wake-up call. Fortunately, the lectionary gave us a reading that I hope got your attention. From Romans, we had that wonderful line,  
[image: quote below]

“the weak eat only vegetables”. So I imagine we are all wide awake now!

Last year - on Sept 7, 2025, we discussed that line in depth. And I invite you to re-visit that sermon if you want on my website @ [paulshepherd.ca](http://paulshepherd.ca). Because I won't repeat it all now. But the point of the reading is still very relevant today. In brief summary, in Romans, St. Paul was helping his congregation come together. The people in his congregation came from different faith traditions. For example, some of his members came from traditions where meat should be avoided. Others ate meat, but avoided meat that had been sacrificed. Others ate everything. In fact, the members of St. Paul's congregation came with a very wide variety of traditions and beliefs. They all had their own idea of what the word “holy” meant.

The phrase, “The weak eat only vegetables” was not about vegetables, or even food. It was about how members of the congregation came from different places, different practices, different traditions. And yet came together as followers of Jesus. St. Paul was encouraging his flock to be open and accepting to other members of the congregation - even if they had different traditions.

And in the church, that has always been the case. Christianity was not given to us by Jesus - shrink-wrapped in it's final form. Christianity has always embraced outside

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ideas.

[image: artwork]

For example, consider this artwork found in our sanctuary. It shows Jesus, at Gethsemane, with a halo. But haloes are not featured in the Bible or in Jewish tradition. Haloes came to Christianity from Roman culture. Haloes actually come from Iran.

St. Paul's congregation was a mixed bag. Rev Paul's congregation is a also mixed bag. I absolutely love the fact that each of us come from our own traditions. Natasha said this very well last week too. Natasha reminded us that each of us has our own relationship with God, and that the gift of the church is that we can come together. That we can all come here and be ourselves. And yes, I do spy on you guys when I'm not here - so even when I'm away you have to behave.

The church has always been a blend of traditions and practices. And we all do better when we learn from each other, rather than simply judge each other. That is what St. Paul was talking about.

St Paul wanted the early church to grow and he knew that is only possible when everyone is embraced as equals. A Church is only a church when everyone is welcomed and allowed to feel like they belong. And that is just as true today as it was in the days of the early church.

[image: forgiveness quote]

Which brings us to our reading from Matthew, which is all about forgiveness. Specifically, expensive forgiveness. Particularly since 2 days ago was the 25th anniversary of the attack we call "9/11". What better time to discuss expensive forgiveness. What better time to consider whether or not we have forgiven at all.

Today, we are reminded of many actions that we might choose to forgive. The obvious actions that we might choose to forgive are the actual attacks that happened 25 years ago. The attacks aimed at the White House, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Centre. Approximately 3,000 people died that day. And others - including rescue workers - died afterwards.

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness. The

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anniversary of 9/11 not only brings to mind the events of that single day 25 years ago. We are also mindful of what has happened as a response to that day.

The military response to 9/11 included the invasion of two countries - Afghanistan and Iraq. These invasions were primarily led by the United States, but Canada and other countries participated. And those two invasions have led to a staggering loss of civilian life. Estimates of the civilian dead in Iraq due to the invasion range up to approximately 1 million. But even conservative estimates of the number of dead civilians in Iraq caused by our collective military invasion is over 100,000 people. Can we forgive ourselves for that?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

Can we forgive our media for whipping us into an emotional frenzy, for systematically attempting to brainwash us into hating all Muslims - that's 25% of the population of our planet - because of the actions of a small number of people? Can we forgive ourselves for following along like sheep - unwilling to think for ourselves?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

Can we forgive ourselves for falling into collective paranoia about terrorism. Terrorism is bad of course. In 2019, about 20,000 people died from terrorism. But why have we lost sight of the fact that every single day, 25,000 people die globally due to malnutrition? This is primarily caused by: economic inequality, military conflict, climate change, and greed. Meanwhile, we spend vast resources on our military and "security" infrastructure.

The last cost estimate I heard of the military response to 9/11 was \$8 Trillion. Would terrorists get any traction at all if we had spent \$8 Trillion constructively around the world in places that needed some help? Can we forgive ourselves for arming ourselves instead of feeding and healing the world?

But there is more than that that is open to the possibility of forgiveness.

Can we forgive ourselves for all of the above, which I believe laid the ground work required to create the socially toxic reality where Islamophobia is given a free pass. Can we forgive ourselves for forgetting that "never again" means "never again for anyone" as we watch a genocide in Palestine unfold before our eyes, live streamed to the

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world.

Does all this sound like expensive forgiveness to you? The word “expensive” does not even come close. And yet, the words of Jesus ring in our ears. We must forgive. That means forgiving others. And forgiving ourselves. Wow.

And closer to home - I'm sure that each of us can think of a situation in our own lives that cries out for forgiveness. Think back over the last week or so. Was there a person that you just wanted to strangle? Was there a person you ignored on the street because of unresolved issues in your own heart? Was there a person who you pretended was not there? Was there a person who you decided was less human than you? Think of an unhealthy relationship in your own life and think about whether forgiveness is what needs to come - right now - for that relationship to move forward in a more healthy direction.

Remember - forgiveness does not mean that the hurt never happened. Forgiveness does not mean that you have to pretend to be friends again. Forgiveness does not mean that you must now pretend to trust someone who is not trustworthy.

Forgiveness means that you have decided to move forward in your own life, and have decided to stop waiting for someone else to do something first. The person in question may in fact owe you something. But forgiveness means that moving forward with your own life is more important to you than waiting for that debt to be repaid. Forgiveness means your own life is more important to you than your need to “fix” the other person. Forgiveness means that new life in the present is more important to you than staying trapped in your past.

[image: creation]

That very long preamble finally leads us to the advertised topic of the week. Because this is also the Season of Creation. And when we think of what is happening on our world, when we listen to the groaning of creation, when we feel the impact of climate change ... it is often very tempting to ... well, what exactly are we tempted to do when we think about climate change?

Hands down, the most common reaction is to forget all about it. We decide we are too small, too powerless to make any real difference anyway.

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Another response - and this one shows up constantly in preaching resources that I find. It shows up in climate sermons. It shows up in well-meaning pamphlets - is guilt. And I want to spend a minute discussing that, because I think it's actually the wrong response to climate change.

To be fair - there are things within our control. I've preached whole sermons on the small, practical steps we can take to fight climate change, and I won't repeat all that today. If you are interested, my sermon from September 29, 2024 is a good starting place. And those steps matter. But most of what passes for climate guilt is not aimed at those steps. It is aimed at things we never actually have control over.

[image: chicken or pig]

So here's an example of the type of resource I sometimes see. Here is a graphic that simply says "chicken or pig". Well, first off, what do you think you are being asked here? Do you think you are being asked to select your next pet? Do you think you are being asked which one you want for lunch? Well no. You are being asked - are you a chicken or are you a pig. And to make sense of that image, we need to think about ... breakfast.

[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]

In this type of messaging, we are being asked just how we respond to climate change. Are we committed to fighting climate change, or are we just involved. It's a guilt trip.

To me, those message are not helpful. For one thing, guilt rarely leads to long-term change in any case. But my other problem is that we are often told to feel guilt about something we have no control over.

[image: grocery aisle - eggs]

Let's do a simple thought experiment. Imagine that you are standing in a grocery

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store, looking to buy some eggs. The store sells 2 types of eggs. One egg is from a local supplier, but the egg comes from a factory farm. The other egg is free-range, organic, “ethical”, but comes from a place you could not even locate on a map.

In one sense, we have a choice. We can buy whichever egg we choose assuming the price is not a factor. But if we choose the local egg, we will feel the guilt of the factory farm. And if we can choose the free-range egg we will feel the guilt from the amount of fuel it took to get that egg to the store. There is no guilt-free option. But whose fault is that?

We should not feel like a personal failure every time we go to a grocery store. Our grocery stores are a rigged game. The morality of our choices has been determined by other people long before you stand in front of those eggs.

And we should not feel guilt for situations over which we have no control.  
[pause]

We should live joyfully into the many small decisions we actually get to make each day that help fight climate change.

Now, I’m sure that if St. Paul was here today he might roll his eyes at me, but I think he was saying something similar. Remember, “the weak eat only vegetables” was not about eating vegetables. It was a challenge to be more open-minded and to listen deeply to other people. Particularly people who come from different traditions. It was a challenge for people who follow simplistic rules rather than engaging with the people around them.

But that is not what is happening when we stand in the aisle of a grocery store. Nobody listening to me invented the rule that “organic” must also mean “flown across an ocean.” Nobody here decided that a fair price for a local free-range egg was not a viable option. That rule was handed to us, by people with the power to write it, and we are the ones who get to feel guilty because of those rules. If there is weakness anywhere in this story, it is not when we are standing in the grocery aisle. It’s in the boardrooms and legislatures that built the system and then stayed quiet about who’s really making these choices.

[image: forgiveness quote]

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And here is where forgiveness comes back in. We can forgive ourselves - not for failing some test that was unfair anyway. But we can forgive ourselves for the exhaustion, the giving up, the choosing not to think about it, that guilt-based messaging tends to produce in all of us.

And we can choose to forgive - while still holding accountable - our governments and the corporations who created the systems that we live in. Forgiveness does not mean pretending the trap isn't real. It means refusing to let our anger and disappointment be the only thing we bring into this sanctuary.

So - where is the hope in all of this? Good question!

[image: David Suzuki]

David Suzuki is a well-known environmentalist and the longtime host of “The Nature of Things”. For decades he has tried to push our governments to implement environmental reforms. But recently he released a different type of statement.

Suzuki admitted that “we have lost”. “We have failed to shift the narrative.”<sup>1</sup> But he unpacked that to mean that telling our government to change is a failed project. Because they are not listening to us. They are listening to money and special interest groups.

Instead, Suzuki suggests that we focus on our local communities. That means understanding things like which of our neighbours need some help and then reaching out. And we can all do that. And together, we can discuss how to bring that idea to life in our own communities.

[image: forgiveness quote]

Forgiveness is not about fixing the past. Forgiveness is about how we choose to live in the present. And when we live in the present, that is where we will find our healing. In community. Here. Now. And perhaps we can all help each other do just that.

Oh - just one more thing. Eat your vegetables!

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipolitics.ca/2025/07/02/its-too-late-david-suzuki-says-the-fight-against-climate-change-is-lost/>