

“God Loves ALL and That’s Not All”

February 18, 2018
Matthew 9: 35-38; 10: 1-15 NRSV

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I believe the greatest gift of the United Church of Canada is its inclusivity. Several years ago Wall Street adopted the tag line: “God loves ALL. So do we.” Frankly, I think that would fit for the whole denomination.

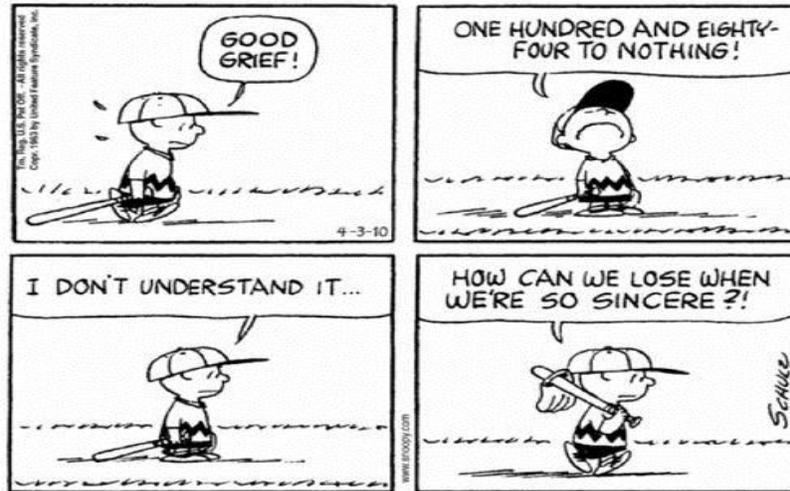


We are known for being a welcoming church — from welcoming the LGBT community to welcoming refugees, to advocating on behalf of those on the margins. Our inclusivity has been a huge gift.

I remember a couple of years ago I went into a pharmacy to get some makeup. In particular I needed some foundation because — well for one, I’ve hit that magic age where it just takes a little more work to look decent, and (more importantly) we record our services, and I noticed I was looking pretty washed out through the lens of the camera. So I explained this to the kid who was working in the cosmetics department. I’m guessing he was about 14, and he wore more makeup than I ever have or ever will! When I explained my situation, that I needed not to look washed out on camera, the youth was clearly interested and wanted to know what I did for a living. When I told him I was clergy, he instantly recoiled. It was just a split second, and he regained his composure. I then added that I was the minister at the United Church and he instantly softened and said: “Oh well, that’s not so bad then.”

Now I doubt I’ll see him in church any time soon, but it was interesting encounter. There’s no question that in a sea of people who have no use for church or see it as a place of judgement and condemnation, that the United Church has a different brand. That’s the brand that our church and the wider United Church has been living on.

Our inclusivity both in this congregation and our denomination has been a huge gift ... *and* it's not enough. Do you remember this Peanuts cartoon?



How can we lose when we're so sincere? That's exactly how I have been feeling. We are just so darned nice and earnest — how could we possibly fail? And yet failure is a distinct possibility. We might be, and for all I know maybe we are, the world's most inclusive church. Yet we could still die as local churches and as a denomination.

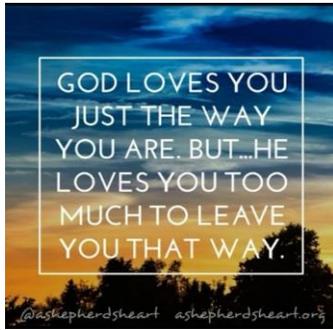
I have a personal mission statement. It sort of just landed in my lap one morning when I was doing a devotional about 16-17 years ago. I can date it because I remember what chair I was sitting in and it was at our house in Stavely, Alberta. My personal mission statement goes like this: ***“Loving and leading people into a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ”.***

What has been neat is that at different times of my ministry, different parts of that mission statement have stood out for me and have been my focus. At times the focus was *leading* and I spent time focusing on my leadership and asking what it means to lead.

For another period of time the focus was on Jesus. I had noticed that I was more comfortable with God in general and not quite sure what to do with Jesus, so I just spent time on that part of it and growing in my comfort and relationship with Jesus.

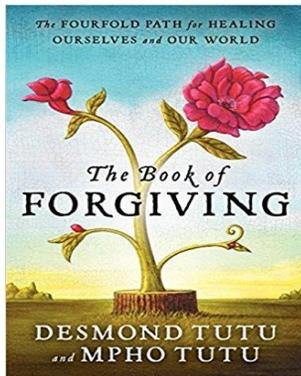
For the last couple of years, the word that has jumped out for me is the word *“transforming”*. Our goal in sharing God's love is transformed lives — our own first, then the lives of others.

I don't know who first said it, but a quote I like is: “God loves you just the way you are. But he loves you too much to leave you there.”



In the United Church we are awesome at the first part of the sentence — at being welcoming and inclusive — but we also need to focus on the second part of the sentence, and that involves change.

We as a church need to find ways to help our people heal, to help them forgive. We experience genuine forgiveness to help others repair their leaky buckets. We have a lot of people who come to our church with leaky buckets — most of us are a little leaky. We hear ‘you belong’, we hear ‘you are loved’ and it feels nice, but it doesn’t last. Deep down we may not believe it. Partly we all just need regular top-ups of love and affirmation, but many of us also need healing from past hurts that make it difficult to really believe and hold onto that love from God and from people. I am realizing that people really want that change and healing.



Josh Bennett spoke last week about how he picked up *The Book of Forgiving* at the same time that we ran the course last year. That was such a wonderful course and it really helped to change people. Sometime it would be good to run it again, even if in a smaller version of it.

I think what the Celebrate Life team is doing with the Life Study Group is a huge part of the transformation piece.

Discipleship is another way to talk about it. Jesus gathered 12 men. That’s not a lot of people! He started teaching them. He taught lots of others too, but those 12 he really worked with and they followed him around the countryside as he preached and healed. He loved them and he led them into a totally-life transforming relationship with himself, and then he sent them out to do the same with others. That’s what it’s all about.



Last winter I started speed skating. I took it up again this winter. I’ve learned a few things, not the least of which is that constant reminder that something that looks so graceful, simple and beautiful is incredibly difficult when you are first learning it. There 2 things that stand out in what I’ve been taught — one is that you have to tighten and strengthen the core, and the other is that you have to trust your edges. In speed skating your blades are very sharp, and you lean onto your edge as you go around the corners. You really have to trust that that edge will dig in and hold you up.

It seems to me these things hold true in the church too. Part of our job in the church is to continually strengthen our core (and in my middle-aged body I can tell you there's work to be done!). That can mean many things, but for me it means strengthening what is the core of our faith, and the core of what we are and what we do. It means going back to the basics of learning how to pray and how to regularly read the scriptures.

The disciples had Jesus right there with them to lead them. I very much believe Jesus is alive, but we have to work a little harder to connect. It's through these age-old spiritual practices or disciplines that we connect in a real way with Jesus. These practices have transformed my walk with Jesus and my life as a result. We assumed that people know how to pray and how to share their faith with other people, and so we stopped teaching.

Did you know that Sunday School didn't use to be just for kids? People from Wall Street would go to the Park Street Sunday School or the Pearl Street Sunday School. It wasn't just for kids.

I always like it when Tom gets up and introduces himself. He always says: "Hi! I'm Tom, and I'm a Christian in training". He knows deep in his being that he is a life-long learner when it comes to following Jesus. We all need to be. As 2 Timothy 2:2 says "**What you have heard from me through many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.**" In other words, keep passing these things on to others.

And then there is the trusting of the edge. That's the freaky part. But if you want to pick up speed, if you want to do that cool speed-skating thing, then you've got to trust your edges and lean out. If you just hunker down and build and tighten your core, you're not going anywhere. However, if you lean out on the edge and you don't tighten your core, you're going to fall spectacularly. It seems to me that in the UCC in recent history we've forgotten both.

As we do that; as we learn the practices that connected us to God; we are sent out. It's frightening to be sent out. We go out on a limb or out on our edge, but that's where the magic happens. We are the *sent-out ones*. The disciples of Jesus don't just huddle at the master's feet to learn; they go out and share that good news. They were sent out and they were told "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic" (Luke 9:3-4). Talk about going out on an edge! How could they do that? Because they had strengthened the core and learned how to fully rely on God. That's where the magic happens. That's where you bring healing. That's where you and whole communities end up being transformed.

God loves all.

Not long ago a Muslim family came to the church during the week. Cathie, (our Office Manager) was in the office. They said they were looking for the Mosque, and that somehow Google had directed them here. We're not sure exactly how that happened, but we suspect that because the Muslim community has used our church for month of Ramadan, that somehow that information remains out there in the world-wide-web.

Cathie told them she didn't think there was a Mosque in Brockville, but that if they wanted a place to pray they were welcome to pray here. So the family; mom, dad, a couple of cute little kids and a grandfather, were taken by our custodian Trevor to a quiet room to pray. They were not here very long, but when they left they made a small donation and they said to Cathie: "Thank you. We were made to feel welcome...like family."

I love that. And I'm proud that we really live out our belief that God Loves All. I'm proud of Cathie and Trevor and so many others putting into practice what we as a congregation put down on paper. God loves all. Sometimes these tag lines can be just words. In a world so filled with hate and racism, I'm so glad they are more than just words here.

God loves all, and that's not all. Let us be willing to let that love change us and change the world around us.

Thanks be to God. Amen