

“Think Different”

November 1, 2020 (Covid 33 – Live Stream 9)
2 Samuel 6:14-22; Philippians 4: 4-9

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(Prayer) Lord, be with us now. Come Holy Spirit. Fill us with your love and joy, and let us hear your word. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing unto you. Amen.

Last week was the 192nd anniversary service of Wall Street United Church. I watched the service online. Kim gave an excellent sermon. But it was a troubling one. She reminded us of how much our church — I’m talking the wider church, the United Church, the Presbyterians, all denominations — the Church is struggling. I’m beginning the official discernment process to become a United Church Minister, and a few of my friends have asked “Why now, when the church is dying?”

So how do we grow our church? How do we turn this around? Let’s start by looking at the scriptures.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians he says “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*”

- That’s the first thing – we must continue to pray. Pray for this church, pray for this congregation, and for this community.

A key part of this scripture is “with thanksgiving”. Always start your prayers with thanksgiving, because somehow, when we thank God, it opens a door in our closed-up minds and lets the Spirit in. And if we’re praying for this church, we have a lot to be thankful for! Wall Street United Church has been serving this community for 192 years and has done some great things for this community. Start your prayer with thanksgiving, then present your request to God.

Let’s look at the next piece of scripture in 2 Samuel. It reads, “*Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might*”. And then in the next verse it describes how his wife was furious for his dancing around half-naked. She was embarrassed and ashamed that he would do this incredibly undignified thing, and gave him a lot of trouble when he got home.

David was praising God with dance, which had never been done before, let alone by a King – it just wasn’t dignified. But he felt moved by

the Spirit to do it, so he did. And he didn't apologize, but rather wrote psalms about praising God through song and dance.

That's the second thing we need to do as a church:

- We must Praise God, and not be afraid to do it. Praise him in new ways when we are moved by the Spirit to do so. Allow the Spirit to help us think differently.

We need to Think Different

Steve Jobs was the founder of Apple Computers. He started the company in his parents' garage. Ten years later he was the CEO of Apple, and it was a two billion-dollar company, employing thousands of people. Then he got fired from his own company. There was a difference in vision for the company direction between him and his COO, and the board sided with the COO. So, Steve was let go, and he went on and started new companies.

About ten years later, in 1997, Apple was on death's doorstep. The stock was nearly worthless, and the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. They hired Steve to come back and take over again. He did a bunch of restructuring, he cut the number of products down and redesigned them, and then he launched this campaign:
(If you have internet watch this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sMBhDv4sik>

The whole idea of "think different" was not only the perfect ad campaign and the perfect slogan for Apple; it was the perfect slogan for Steve Jobs. He was a guy who did things differently. He thought differently. He wasn't confined to the norms, of what was done; he let his imagination soar, and brought his company with it. Apple went from the lowest stock to the highest in the market in just a few years. And then he changed the world again by introducing the Apple iPhone.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Today is "All Saints Day", and whenever I think of Saints, I think of Saint Francis of Assisi. Now there was a guy who did things differently! In the early 1200's Italy was a very prosperous region, and a very money and consumer-driven culture. And the church was no exception — it too was known for its wealth, its opulence, and for priests having mistresses and building large estates for themselves with money from the church. It was the time of city states, a time of wars breaking out, and this was during the Crusades.

Francis didn't become a priest, and he didn't even become a monk. He started his own way of praising God by living in absolute poverty and spreading love and kindness to everyone around him. He started a movement on his own that wasn't at that time part of the Catholic church. It was just a simple movement of living simply, and spreading love and joy. This was completely different from the Catholic church of the day in the 1200s.

Eventually his movement grew so much that the Pope banned him from being allowed to preach. So Francis walked to Rome, and got an audience with the Pope. It must have been a remarkable scene of incredible contrast – there in the Papal Palace, filled with wealth and opulence, and gold and silver, the Pope in all his glory, and there before him was this humble, dirty, barefooted man asking him for permission to preach. Francis wasn't a priest, had no training, and wasn't a monk. He was just a man living in poverty, spreading the teachings of Christ with love and joy, and starting a new movement that was totally different. Somehow, remarkably, by the Spirit of God, Francis broke through to the Pope, and the Pope gave him official Papal Authority to start his own movement. It was completely unprecedented.

Francis – who became Saint Francis two years after his death, did things differently. Like David, he was moved by the Holy Spirit to think different, and worship in a new way.

Pope Francis

There is a reason why the current Pope chose the name Francis. When you become Pope, you choose a new name. His name was George Bergoglio, and when he was elected Pope, he went by the name Francis. And it's a very fitting name for him, because as a Priest, a Bishop, and a Cardinal, he was a man of God who did things differently. As a Priest he entered into the slums of Buenos Aires to preach to the lower income neighborhoods and build churches there. When he became Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he walked through the palace of the Archbishop where he was to reside and found that it was filled with expensive things and wealth. He gave most of those things away to the poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. And he refused to live in that palace, because it was too grand for him. He preferred to live simply and humbly.

He was a man who did things differently. And now as Pope he's doing things differently. Ten days ago he expressed for the first time his support for same sex civil unions. For a Pope, that's thinking differently.

The United Church – Think Different

I mentioned earlier in this sermon that I'm just starting the discernment process for ordination in the United Church. And some friends of mine ask me why; why now when the church is dying? And why the United Church? My answer is that the United Church is a church that thinks differently. We have a tradition of thinking differently. Its 2020 today and the Pope has just come out in favour of same sex civil union. The United Church dealt with this issue 32 years ago! In 1988 we were way ahead of the times dealing with the issue of Gay Ordination, and officially having churches that were Affirming Congregations.

Last week Kim said that she wasn't sure if the United Church would survive. I'm going to respectfully disagree. I think we will — because we're a church that does things differently and a church that allows its members to think and do things differently. We don't have strict orthodox governance that other denominations have.

Kim has preached on this before, but I'll mention it again very quickly – it was our father; Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett, who had the foresight to bring screens into the sanctuary, and to bring in a worship band years ago. And Kim is bringing this church into new directions, and I'm excited to see where.

Pray, Praise God, and Worship with Joy

As we move into the 2020s, I encourage all of you to

- 1) Pray! Pray for this church and the congregation. Pray for the Minister. Pray for our leaders. And Pray for the United Church – with Thanksgiving, and then present your request to God.
- 2) Praise God with all of your might! Whether that's through dancing, song, meals, ... etc.
- 3) Don't be afraid to think different – let the Spirit guide you into new ways of worship. Amen

Prayer:

Lord we thank you and we praise you for your Spirit that is here among us. We pray Lord that your spirit will fill us with joy and love. Guide us O Lord to new ways of worshiping you and spreading your love. Help us to think differently. Guide us. Let us follow your love and joy. Amen.