

“Celebrating our Past; Looking to our Future”

Mark 8:31-36 NRSVUE

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

For almost two hundred years this church has been a faithful witness to the goodness of God. That is pretty amazing. I’m also excited about the deep Methodist roots of Wall Street United. Each tradition that became part of the United Church of Canada brought special gifts to the Union, and the Methodists brought to us a real heart for the world.

Even though I grew up at First United in Truro, Nova Scotia, my journey back to faith started out as a teenager in a Pentecostal church. Pentecostals, if you are not aware, are an offshoot of the Methodist church. I love the spirituality of the Pentecostals, but like a good Methodist, I was drawn to reflect deeply on the social importance of the life of faith. Sometimes I say that I asked too many questions to be a good Pentecostal! But during my years of theological study, I have witnessed Pentecostal theologians coming into their own sense of self and owning the important contribution that they make to global theology.

This renewal of reflecting on their roots was inspired largely through the work and personal encouragement of Wesleyan scholar Donald Dayton, who challenged young Pentecostals to dig into their Methodist roots for resources to take them into the future. Wall Street United Church has much to celebrate from its own history, its roots. My friend Eric tells me you have a book on the history of your church.

I would love to hear the stories of what has captured your hearts from your own history here. I believe that your history is full of acts of courageous faith, such as the courage shown in the harrowing story of the rescue of Herman D. Squires in 1874 when his hot

air balloon crashed into the spire of this very church! It's a great story that I stumbled upon while looking at Brockville history on the web. And your stories continue all the way up to the Celebrate Life services that emerged during the pandemic. These services do what Methodists have done best throughout the years — bring good news to those who are on the margins of society.

There is always a lot to celebrate, and it is worth celebrating as it gives us resilience for the future. We need to remember the stories of what we've endured and overcome in order to face the challenges of today. Celebrating the past reminds us of our ability to adapt to the changes going on in our community and in the world itself.

Many of the expansion and building projects of a church, especially a church that has been around as long as Wall Street ... met the needs of our communities, be it Sunday School classrooms, gymnasiums, kitchens, and even sanctuaries! When needs capture our hearts, we can remember the history of the generous responses of our people to help prepare the church to meet those challenges.

Celebrating our past helps us to remember our history of faithfulness which is that quality that encourages us to listen for where the Spirit is leading. Faithfulness is willing to work towards the good we see that we can do in the world — even if we sometimes get it wrong. When I think of faithfulness, I remember a time when we were part of a Wesleyan church, just around the corner from Southminster United Church where I serve. Sunnyside Wesleyan was often a stop along the way in our journey. In between pastoral charges and at times when we just didn't know where we should be, my partner Sharon and I would go to Sunnyside.

What I loved about Sunnyside is that they always encouraged me to use my gifts, and this one time when we were part of the church, I ran a small listening group with the assistant minister there. This was a group where we would come together, pray, sing a few reflective songs, and sit in silence as we asked if God was saying anything to us that day. It was a really encouraging group, a place to slow down and listen for how our hearts were being moved by the Spirit. And if we didn't feel God was saying anything, we'd just pray and finish up. (You can probably detect the unintentional Quaker spirituality we were modelling!)

Sometimes we would meet in the sanctuary, and invite the whole church to come, but most times we met in a small parlour in the basement of the old manse. Because this was a listening group, I tried to listen to what God was saying. One day I felt like God was saying that we were done what we were supposed to do in our meetings. I called up Clint, the assistant minister, and told him what I was sensing, and he concurred. He had that sense as well. We finished up that group and were not in a hurry for the next

thing. So, it was surprising that a few weeks later I felt like I should go that night to the church. I could not shake the sense that I should go, so I grabbed my guitar and headed over.

There, alone in the parlor, I sang a few songs — when I walked the Spanish church that had been sharing the church building. They wanted to use the room. I was happy to tell them that this room was now available. I was invited to stay and worship with them. I didn't understand much, but I could sense the Spirit was there, and felt the kindness of God. Because sometimes, sometimes we are given a glimpse at what our faithfulness can do.

The one downside to having a rich history is that we can become nostalgic. Nostalgia is a way of looking at the past through the lens of being in lament of the present. We look at the past as something to aspire to recreate — and forget that the past is worth remembering *because we were faithful then*. We see this a lot in our society, this pining for the supposed “good old days,” especially in a post-pandemic world, where the temptation is to imagine that we had it much better before all the lock downs. It is easy to forget that those days had their own challenges, and even if they were somehow better, no amount of pining will bring those days back.

When we remember, we must do so with an eye to faithfulness: How were we faithful to God?

We responded to God's call to join with the work of the Spirit uniting the Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and later the Evangelical Brethren. I am amazed that our founding traditions had so little trouble setting a common doctrine for the United Church! Sure, other parts of the Basis of Union were harder to work through, but this is the area that is usually the hardest for different traditions to deal with. I am so appreciative that the United Church has continued to seek God as our basis of faith grows and evolves.

The Song of Faith, our latest doctrinal formulation, is an amazingly beautiful work of art and an expression of this faithfulness. As we continue to grow in our faith, we are being faithful to God. How were we faithful to each other? We rose to the challenges, creating space for new types of groups and even new types of music — allowing the new generations to breathe and worship, to come to know the love of God that so captured our own hearts.

During the 1950s most of our churches found that a post-war Canada was full of optimism and opportunity. And the people of Canada had lots of kids. In those days, churches, (and I'm sure Wall Street was no exception), churches built Sunday school

classrooms and programmes to meet the needs of society. We sometimes call these “the golden years” of the United Church. But such a nostalgic phrasing conceals that these times were feats of faithfulness. Many churches had to build additions and prepare curriculum, even to adjust their music, to welcome the youths who would come to make the United Church their home. We were faithful when we rose to the challenges of each moment in history. Even in our current moment we are rising to the challenge of facing and righting our past mistakes.

How were we faithful to our community? The United Church came together when it did, to become the church that Canada needed. A church that represented the voices of many Canadian Christians. A church that could help shape the policies and practices in our culture. Certainly, in our history we have seen considerable favour in helping build our Canadian society. Faithfulness allows us to adapt to the needs of our communities, local, national, and abroad.

When we are remembering the past, we also must look to the future. The problem with theology, (and I say this as an academic theologian,) is that theology does not stand still. God might be unchanging, but we continue to grow in our understanding of God’s love and of God’s ways. One of the most helpful ways I’ve found to read Scripture is to recognize that it captures the reflections of a people made in the image and likeness of God, and who are growing in their sense of what that truly means.

Scripture also captures the good, the bad, and even the ugly parts of our faith, and this is what makes it so powerful. By capturing the human dimension of our faith, scripture continues to speak profoundly into our lives and our world today.

Consider our gospel reading today. Nostalgia was even a problem for the followers of Jesus! In the text Jesus spells out the future: *“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.”* As people of the resurrection, we can look at this passage and say to ourselves: “See — everything is going to work out!” But that is the benefit of hindsight. Rising again was likely confusing to his hearers, but everyone there knew what it was like to suffer and likely no one there wanted to die. They knew the same kind of suffering Jesus was describing.

Jesus’ disciples largely came from the margins of society. They were not the elders, the priests, or even great students of the Scriptures. They were fishers, tax collectors, zealots, prostitutes, those who knew suffering and rejection from the people who should have been there for them, the people who should have shown them the love of God. At that moment, those people had Jesus with them!

It is so hard to consider changing things when we feel like things are finally the way we have always wanted them to be. So, Peter is pushing back against the challenges ahead.

Can you imagine rebuking Jesus for suggesting that life is about to get hard? Peter's response is a very human response. How many of us felt deep frustration when the lockdowns began? But challenges, like this, give us opportunities to be faithful. To be faithful to God.

When I went back to school to study theology, I had to take an English course where you wrote a few papers on topics that you chose. A well-meaning friend who knew the traditions I was part of gave me some advice: "Don't write about the church and LGBTQ+ folk and don't write about healing prayer." So, I wrote papers about both of those subjects! See, I had questions. Theology is faith seeking understanding — faith that gives us the courage to ask questions that might very well upend our current beliefs!

So, I asked the question of how well the church had responded to issues of queer inclusion, and I was shocked that *only the United Church had done the actual work of investigating the implications of LGBTQ+ inclusion from a Spiritual, Scriptural, Sociological, and Political standpoint*. That opened the doors to think deeply about how our churches treated people who were on the margins. Specifically, people who had to hide their identity to feel like they belonged. My own faithfulness to God caused my theology to change. I ended up performing the first same-sex marriage in my previous tradition, and walked with others in that tradition for many years trying to ensure that the harm being done to my queer friends would be reduced, if not stopped.

One of the big challenges that faces us in the United Church today is how we will be faithful to the next generation. John Wimber, who at one time led the Vineyard churches where I ministered in for many years, once told a group of ministers in churches that were on the cutting edge of contemporary Christian worship music: "You should not expect that your children will want to worship the same way you do." Making sure each of us has a voice, our own voice, in our communities is how we are faithful to each other.

In a lot of our churches, we have let nostalgia prevent us from creating the space needed for others to breathe and worship God. We need to remember that we have been faithful in the past to adapt and include others and include their gifts. This is the way forward for us. We need to make space in our churches, in our services, and in our lives for those who take up the mantle of our United Church and make it their own.

We are faithful to each other when we give each other a voice, a space to be who God created us to be. We are faithful when celebrate our diversity. And we need to be faithful to our community.

The reality is that the world has changed. Religion does not play the same role in society. Where religion does try to play a society-shaping role, it is often embarrassingly narrow in its focus. It is stuck on nostalgia and fails to see how it could help bring a more equitable future. Our own faithfulness will mean creatively standing with those on the margins. Speaking for the oppressed. Calling for just laws. That is the work that can only be done from a spirit of faithfulness.

In our text Jesus tells us the cost of faithfulness. Take up your cross and follow me. Don't try to save your life — you will lose it. How often does nostalgia rob us of the life God wants us to live? Jesus is calling his disciples to hold lightly to their lives in this world. To be faithful.

Let us pray:

God make us a faithful church. Help us celebrate our past faithfulness, not in a nostalgic sense, but in a sense that strengthens us to meet the challenges of our future.

God, capture our hearts afresh with your love, and give us that Methodist love for our world so we might hold onto our lives lightly, because being faithful to you is what the world needs to see right now.

Thank you for the years of faithfulness of Wall Street United Church. May they celebrate many, many more.

Amen