

Reflection (Transcript)
Westminster United Church

July 20, 2014



1622-B St. Mary's Rd., Winnipeg, MB R2M 3W7
Phone: 204 954-2900 Fax: 204 954-2909
Administrator – Maggie Zoske: mzoske@wpgpres.ca
Presbytery Minister – Dea. Richard Manley-Tannis: rmmt@wpgpres.ca
winnipegpresbytery.ca



Good Morning.

It is a pleasure to be here.

Before I begin and offer a prayer, I would like to say that it is not only an honour for me to be here but I also bring you greetings from the Presbytery – your brothers and sisters in Christ here in Winnipeg. Winnipeg is composed of over forty ministries – congregations and community ministries, and the work that you do here is part of that faithful good news. So, thank you, for having me.

I would invite you into this time of prayer – to hear these words as we move towards the Word.

Holy Storyteller,

We gather together in this moment as a unique gathering of seekers and doubters, friends, sisters and brothers.

We gather to experience what you might be saying, whispering, urging us to hear.
We gather those who have experienced or long to experience the life, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

We gather to experience your word. In this moment on the cusp of the word, we prepare ourselves to hear your wisdom.

In this moment on the cusp of the word, we still ourselves to the spirit flowing.
In this moment on the cusp of the word, we enter into a moment of silence in which your voice is ever present.

1997: I am an example of what is called Generation X. I really, really do not trust institutions – in particular, the Church. But, in 1997, something was happening to me. The soil of who I was - was being turned; and, I also had this longing. I had pretty much walked through almost every faith system you can imagine, trying to find out where to park this thing called my faith and my doubts, and I really, really did not want to come to a Christian denomination.

Nonetheless, in 1986 and 1988, this denomination made some choices that challenged my cynicism.

- In 1986, this denomination decided that maybe we had been – wrong – about how we treat our First Nations people; maybe we caused more harm though our intent may have been good; maybe we had confused the good news with our own egos.
- Then, in 1988, this denomination made another crazy decision around ministry and sexual orientation, and, in my cynicism, that stuck;

So in 1997, I walked into a United Church on Queen Street in Kingston, Ontario, and started to say, okay, maybe this is where I am supposed to be. I am not church-ed nor do I have a clue of

what to expect - and I experienced this thing called The Word – this thing called The Reflection – and I was, like, hunh, these people think.

2003: I'm in Northern Saskatchewan at the Annual Conference – the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church of Canada, and I am surrounded by all these crazy ministers who are called Diaconal - never heard of this before – and the guest preacher who was doing the theme in sharing the word entitled her three-day presentation “Faith, Fear and Fortitude”. That's when I shook my head and told my partner: “I think I'm going into ministry”.

The Word did not really help me. The Word is a funny thing. It's not completely about education. It's not completely about pastoral care. It's not completely about giving us space to reflect. It is all of those things and so many more. Though I honestly don't feel a call to The Word, it is an amazing gift that this Protestant experience offers us every single Sunday. It allows us to dig into the soil of who we are, who we think we are, who we might be – and to dig deep.

I was struck and continue to be struck when in Jesus's ministry we hear Jesus told the crowd all these things in parable. Without a parable, he told them nothing. Now, for those of us who have been doing this a long time, that might make a lot of sense - but parables don't make sense – that's the whole point. Parables aren't black and white vineries. They are intentionally there to throw us off our game. They're intentionally there to challenge us – to ask us what is it we think we're hearing and what is it that we're actually hearing.

Greg and I have talked about this - that he, himself, has been using this passage throughout from Matthew. I love this passage. This passage is so filled with paradox and things that don't make any sense, at the end you're like, ok, what am I supposed to be hearing here? Jesus talks about the seed thrower as good and, later on, he goes around and says, well, maybe they're not so good. He talks about wheat as this robust, abundant crop and yet he compares the kingdom to mustard seeds which, if you have a green thumb, you know that a mustard seed is a weed. It's like taking dandelions and putting it in your gardens. He says: that's the kingdom.

As I was reflecting on coming to Westminster United Church today and sharing the word with you, I really didn't know what I was supposed to share with you. So, I dug into this passage, and what struck me isn't that the seeds are as important as perhaps is the soil into which we throw those seeds. As a denomination that is experiencing radical change – difficult change – we ask ourselves, lost in the wilderness, what are these seeds that we are throwing? So, I want to wrestle a little bit with the soil.

I want to wrestle a little bit with the idea that the seeds have never changed. The seeds are and have always been about finding people, inviting people, with compassion and humility – to invite them into a place of transformation – to say, ‘you are loved’, ‘you are not broken’ – ‘the world

may give you a message of judgment – it may judge your colour, your language, your race, who you love, how you love, where you love. Jesus's message was that all are welcome.

What is this soil? The soil that we in the United Church of Canada, have been in for closing in on a hundred years of our history as a Protestant denomination. One that traces its roots back all the way to the third century. We are a denomination and an experience that has been the people who made the soil. We have been at the center of decisions for a very, very long time. Some would say that we have been part of empire, that we have been part of the power structures. In this country, this denomination is the only one that was enacted by an Act of Parliament. We were and have been central to decision making in a way that as we move past that is really difficult to look down and say: what is this earth in which I stand now? Some of the things that I would celebrate which were done by this congregation itself in that time of soil are:

- In World War II, this denomination, this congregation of Westminster United Church did some very dramatic and amazing things. It helped. It helped raise funds to deal with the reality of refugees and those who suffered the outcomes of World War II. It was present in helping men and women returning from a conflict which continues to baffle us and yet which we felt called to support.
- Going back even further – in the 1930's, Westminster United Church, was deeply involved in the Depression. Your women's organizations and your ministers at the time espoused that the economic system was not equal and fair. You made choices to share from a place where you were decision makers, where we were decision makers.
- In perhaps a living memory of the 1990's and 80's during the Bosnian conflict, this congregation made a choice to not only speak about the conflict in Bosnia but to actually sponsor a family and their children to move out of that conflict into Winnipeg.

That's some amazing soil. That's some rich, faithful choices, and yet – and I'm not going to belabour the point – we all know the soil has changed. This isn't surprising. We may not like it but God's moved, the world's moved, and the question is what does that mean to us as the United Church in Canada? What does that mean for Westminster United Church? As I was dealing with this image of the soil – what I got out of the parable from Matthew is:

- What is your intention when you throw those seeds?
- Is our intention as a denomination that is wrestling with this change and what to do: is it about refilling these pews? Is it about going back? Is it about grieving?

Perhaps those are rhetorical questions which are all of that; and, yet, the difficult reality is that the soil is changed. We are not going back. There is no going back. So what do we do? How do we hold that parable? How do we herald that paradox of grief and God's doing some really, really cool things?

I want to read to you a piece that explains this new soil. It comes from our national denominational magazine, The Observer. This is a plug if someone in here can become an Observer enthusiast. It describes this shift into the new soil in the following way:

“In other words, there is a gap between what Canadians believe Church should be concerned with -which is improving the wider world - and what they believe they are concerned with - which is internal rules, rights and regulations. Faith groups need to find a way to let the public know about all the work they’re doing from advocating for nuclear and chemical disarmament to researching human trafficking in Canada. We need to share that the realities that our values and who we are and understand ourselves to believe as followers of Christ are, in fact, not at all dissimilar to what secular Canada wants in the world. We’re just not doing a very good job of transmitting that message in new soil.”

What then is that new soil? What does this metaphor of soil mean? As with any good parable, it’s not really new soil, is it? This soil in which we sit in the twenty-first century - when we can send a signal across our solar system and hear back in a couple of days - is the new normal. Those people who are outside of these walls who are not identifying as Christian - who are for the first time in this new soil -are doing something very, very old. So old that it even pre-dates our understanding of church after the third century. So old that it goes back to the early church. The reality is this Christian experience - this Christian journey - is a choice. Those outside this wall get to choose where they park their faith. Nobody can tell them what to believe. There are no rights and regulations. If we’re not out there, if we’re not where they are, if we’re not in their soil, then I think we have to ask ourselves: how are we sharing the good news? Because, if we are keeping the good news to ourselves, what’s our intention?

If the good news is about being compassionate and humble and helping people be transformed, I can offer one more piece about what this new soil looks like: this morning, I was standing out there and I facebooked a picture of the sign with my name on it, and said, “I really hope I know what I’m talking about today”. That message went out through social media to over 2,000 people. Two thousand people have a choice to say, “I wonder what’s happening at Westminster United Church today? Maybe I’ll go on their website later and see if there’s something more about this.”

It’s an amazing time. God’s abundance is all around us. The question is: are we prepared to throw seeds into new soil?

As I draw this time of reflection to an end with you, I’d just like to offer some of the things that I’m seeing, that I would celebrate as the Winnipeg Presbytery minister with a very long title which, if you want to know it, is: Winnipeg Ministry Presbytery Minister of Evangelism, Mission and Church Development. I have a lot of syllables.

In the time that I have known you – and I have known you since 2004 – you, as a faith community, have done some amazing things with this thing about choice. Two that I would hold up are: your Bell Tower Cafe and your gardens. I suspect that both of those things have for some of you been really, really fun and really exciting while others have said: “Why are we doing this? Why are we investing in opening the doors to those who don’t even worship here?” Perhaps some have even said, “They’re not even giving us money ‘cause we need to have the money talk.” But, here’s the reality, those men and women, children who come to both those ministries of yours are coming because they have a longing. They have a longing to be cared for. They have a longing to be embraced. They have a longing to be fed. I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure that’s a consistent message that Jesus’s parables talked about:

Who are we feeding? Who are we offering good news to?

Here’s the irony about finding out what people need – when you find out what they need, you enter into a relationship with them, and once you are in a relationship with them, you can start saying, “I’d really like to share this ministry of a crazy Rabbi called Jesus”.

You’re doing some amazing things in this time of change and I would just like to thank you and say that in this difficult time, you are good news. Praise be to God.