

2023 08 20 – Daring Justice

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28 (The Inclusive Bible)

I remember when I was a student returning to school after being away for the summer. One of my biggest worries was that the teacher would give a pop quiz to find out what we had remembered (or forgotten) from the previous year. My memory was always a little fuzzy on those first few days. But all it took was a quick review and then all that knowledge that had been stored away would start to come back.

Preparing for the new church year is very similar. I find myself going back to emails and minutes from May and June to remind myself just what happened two or three months ago. Five of our church committees are meeting next week to begin preparations for the fall, so I've already been doing a lot of looking back in order to plan for the future

One of the things that I was reminded of as I was "looking back," was the review of our Mission Statement that our Leadership Team started last spring. You may remember that we had a circle conversation in April and the congregation was invited to provide feedback by the first week of May. Our Leadership Team has created a small task group to review all of your comments and come back with some recommendations. This work will be continuing when we meet at the end of this month.

The current [Mission Statement](#) of First United Church has been around for several years. Let's say it together:

We, at First United Church, are called by the spirit
to be a caring community of faith actively pursuing
spiritual growth and compassionate outreach.

I've always liked this mission statement. But I know it hasn't changed since I've been here and that's nine years already. So it's time for us to take another look at who we are and why we are here.

The United Church of Canada recently went through a similar process. In 2021 our General Council gathered feedback from across the country and in 2022 they unveiled a new call (or mission) and a new vision statement for the entire church. Since we are in the midst of reviewing our own mission statement, I thought this would be a good time to take a look at the call and vision of our wider church.

The call is very short, three phrases, six words:

Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, Daring Justice

The vision is very similar in style to our mission statement:

Called by God, as disciples of Jesus,
The United Church of Canada seeks to be
a bold, connected, evolving church
of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities

united in deep spirituality,
inspiring worship, and daring justice.

<https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision>

Over the next three weeks, it is my plan to explore the call of The United Church of Canada one phrase at a time. As it turns out, I'm going backwards. Today we are going to explore the meaning of Daring Justice.

Do let's start with the word "Justice." What are some of the concerns, topics, issues, that we associate with justice (racism, forced adoptions, climate change, conversion therapy, poverty, food security, gender-based violence, truth & reconciliation, refugees, peace). Many of these are issues that The United Church of Canada and First United Church, in particular, are already focussing on.

So we can name some of the issues and we have an idea of what justice is about, what about the word "Daring." As always, it is good to look back before going forward. I'm wondering if you can give me some examples of times when The United of Canada or First United Church have been daring in our justice work (apologies to First Nations (1986 & 1998), decision to ordain gays & lesbians (1988), endorsing same-sex marriage (2005) painting of the steps at First, supporting refugee families). What it is that makes an act of justice daring? (reason to fear: lawyers feared being sued, divisions in the church, reprisals from the community, raising enough \$\$\$).

What are some other examples of people or movements, even outside the church, who have demonstrated Daring Justice? (Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo...).

In today's scripture reading Jesus leaves his home province of Galilee and travels to the district of Tyre and Sidon. There a Canaanite woman comes and begs Jesus for help because her daughter is ill. Jesus and his disciples ignore her, but she persists. Eventually her begging and pleading start to annoy the disciples and they ask Jesus to get rid of her. Jesus turns to the woman and says, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." He's telling her that he's not willing to do anything to help her, because she is an outsider.

But the woman still doesn't give up. She lies on the ground in front of him and begs for help. And he responds with these words, "But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Yes, Jesus compared this woman to a dog. At that point, he was so focussed on his own people that Jesus was willing to ignore, and even add to, the pain of this foreigner.

But the woman continues saying, "True Rabbi, but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table." At which point, Jesus seems to have an epiphany. It's as if he finally understands his true mission. He tells the woman she has "great faith" and immediately heals her daughter.

It's certainly true that the Canaanite woman in this story demonstrated great daring. She had no idea how Jesus and his disciples would respond, but she

was willing to risk her own dignity and safety in order to get help for her child. Her story fits right in with Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, or Alberta Billy, the Indigenous woman who asked the United Church of Canada for an apology.

I also believe that Jesus demonstrated Daring Justice in this reading. Yes, he doesn't look very good at the beginning of the story, but what he demonstrates at the end is a willingness to learn, a willingness to change, a willingness to be changed. Jesus listened to what this woman, this foreigner, this outsider was saying and he transformed because of it. He realized that his ministry was even bigger than he thought. Jesus realized that his mission was not just to the Israelites, but that he was actually a light for the world.

Daring Justice often takes us out of our comfort zone and forces us to look beyond the walls of our doctrines, our rituals and even our church buildings. Michael Blair, the General Secretary of The United Church of Canada recently said,

I think the Call to Daring Justice is a recognition that The United Church has a reputation of being courageous over the years—we have been the first to do a whole bunch of things—but I think we are being called to imagine things differently. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVqJZj_19mE

Michael went on to give an example. He talked about church property and wondered about the possibility of engaging our neighbourhoods in discussions about what to do with our land and our buildings. How daring is that! To be

willing to listen to the needs of the people of our community, our city. To be ready to truly listen and to be open to whatever ideas or proposals may come forward.

Just so you know, our Leadership Team is already considering just such a conversation. It is my hope that, like Jesus, we will be able to listen, to truly hear, and to respond to the needs of our community with open hearts and open minds.

That we will be willing to adapt and even to change, to live out the Call of The United of Canada, the call to Daring Justice. May it be so. Amen.

Hymn: VU # 598 *When Pain of the World*

– Composed and sung by Jim & Jean Strathdee