

2025 06 01 – *One in Love*

Scripture: John 17:20-26 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Last weekend I attended the Living Skies Regional Gathering at Grace-Westminster United Church in Saskatoon. On Saturday evening, there was a banquet to honour those of us who are retiring this year and those who are beginning their career as ministry personnel. After the dinner, we were all given the opportunity to speak for a few minutes. I started my speech with the following words:

I grew up in Eldad United Church, a small rural congregation just an hour outside of Toronto. I'm grateful for the fact that my faith was formed in a church that preached a Gospel of Love. One of the images that I remember from that time is a Live Love poster in the psychedelic print that was common in the 1960's.

Today's scripture reading is also about living love. It is the evening of Jesus' arrest and Jesus, surrounded by his disciples, is saying a final prayer. Jesus is praying not for himself, but for his disciples and then he says,

I don't pray for them alone.

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,
that all may be one, as you Abba, are in me and I in you;

I pray that they may be one in us,
so that the world may believe that you sent me.

Jesus also prays,

I in them, you in me—

That they may be made perfect in unity.

Then the world will know that you sent me,

And that you loved them as you loved me.

Jesus was praying to a God of love, a God so familiar to him that he called that God, Abba, or Daddy. Jesus wasn't praying that God would love him or his disciples or even his church; he knew that wasn't necessary. Jesus knew that the love of the Holy Mystery is unconditional and everlasting. Instead, Jesus was praying that all his disciples, his followers, present and future would experience God's love so profoundly, so intimately, that they would be one with God and thus one with each other. That they would be made perfect in unity.

I can just imagine Jesus' disciples squirming in their seats as they listened to Jesus' prayer. What he was praying for them wasn't going to be easy! Yes, Jesus was praying to God, but really his message was for his disciples. He knew and they knew that unity, living as one, is hard. Jesus' followers came from different professions, different families, different traditions, and different lifestyles. They included both men and women, rich and poor, old and young. Some of them had even been ostracized by their society until Jesus welcomed them. This motley group of people had been living and travelling together for a few years and yes, there had been arguments, hurt feelings and major misunderstandings. Jesus' disciples knew that diversity is hard, but they also knew the power of love. They knew that this community of faith that Jesus had built was worth it.

In my speech last weekend I continued my story saying:

I took a break from the church in my 20's but when I returned it was to Bellefair United in the Beach in Toronto. That church became a place of healing as I dealt with childhood trauma, fell in love for the first time, came out of the closet, and eventually discerned my call to ministry. My journey to the pulpit was possible because I belonged to a denomination that, in 1988, had already begun the process of becoming affirming.

The United Church of Canada knows the struggles that come from welcoming diversity. But our denomination also knows that those differences make us stronger. The decision, in 1988, to allow the ordination of gay men and lesbian women was made in love. A previous decision, in 1937, to ordain Lydia Gruchy, our first woman minister, was also made in love. More recently, in 2009, our General Council continued to live love when they approved our Commitment to Inclusion. This commitment states our opposition to discrimination against any person on any basis. I am truly grateful to be part of a church that continues to move forward on this path of love and justice.

In the United Church of Canada there are currently about 2500 congregations and each one of those congregations is on its own affirming path. Here at First United we have entered our fourth year of being an Affirming Ministry. It is wonderful to have this opportunity to reflect on our history in this process and to look forward to what the future might hold. Some of you may remember that our first celebration took place in February 2022 on Zoom. Today we are using some

of the same prayers and singing some of the same songs. It's so good to be singing, praying and preaching in person this time around.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed on the night before he died. He prayed for his disciples and he prayed for us. He prayed that we might have a deep connection with the Holy Mystery, that our connection might be so intimate that we would be at one with the Essence of Love. Jesus prayed that this love would be so strong that it would be evident to all who knew us. That we would be known for the ways we live love. And that we would live as one in love.

Last Saturday evening, I ended my speech with the following words:

And finally I have had the privilege of being in ministry at First United in Swift Current for nearly 11 years and I want to express my thanks to a congregation that has been willing to stretch and grow with me. During this time we have gone through two refugee sponsorships, become a voice for earth care and navigated the affirming ministry process. Every day I am grateful that we can be a progressive and an inclusive presence in the midst of one of the most socially conservative areas in this province.

Thank you for being The United Church and thank you for allowing me to share my journey with you.