

Reflection: Shake the Dust, Carry On  
Luke 10: 1-12    United Church 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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A number of years ago while travelling in Italy we made a decision to go to Milan to try and see Leonard da Vinci's *Last Supper*. We learned that getting in to see it would be difficult. It was the height of the popularity of Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code* and tourists were flocking to see the Painting. We discovered that we could get in to see the art if we were on a city tour where it was included in the ticket. So off we went on a tour of Milan by bus.

One of the stops was, of course, the great Cathedral. The somewhat disimpassioned tour guide took us around the Duomo showing us the various important sights. At the very end she said, almost as a throw away, that by the way the Baptistery was located downstairs and it was not part of the tour but if we wanted to go we were welcome to find our own way there and pay the one dollar admission. We just needed to be back to the bus on time. She added that it was believed St. Augustine had been baptized there.

Immediately, keeping within our 20 minute time limit, Nancy and I made our way to the baptistery. Down a flight of stone stairs, so thin from ruin and wear they almost didn't separate, we fell upon a quiet stone room with a low ceiling, more like a crawl space. There in the middle we stood next to an octagon shaped dip in the stone where the baptismal font stood. There was nobody else there. We stood for a few minutes coming to the realization that it was here where St. Ambrose was said to have baptized Augustine—one of the Fathers of the

Church—when he chose and accepted initiation in the Christian faith. Standing there was one of those powerful spiritual awareness moments when not only do you realize you are standing on holy ground where the footsteps of the faithful have passed but you realize that you too are part of that story. \*



Earlier that same week some of my other travelling companions had been remarking on how young our country seemed in comparison to Europe with our short history and how we were always dwelling on the new in North America. He was saddened that we didn't have family chapels which held the stories and traditions of multiple generations. It made him feel lonely and small in the grand scale of history. But when I had the moment of standing in a baptismal font where Christians were blessed and welcomed 1600 years ago—I realized this was the family history to which I belonged. We were a part of a greater history than just our immediate past.

Today we mark the 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our United Church. Churches throughout the country are marking it in different ways this month. Many have already had their celebrations. The marking of anniversaries are important for remembering our past, the history we come out of and the way, in the church, the faithful have tried to live out the gospel in each time and place.

With the value and remembering of an anniversary, though, there is always a risk that that remembering turns into nostalgia. Not only are we celebrating what has brought us this far as a testimony of faith and how we continue to do so into the future but nostalgia has the risk of disabling us for the time ahead. Remember when the church was full—two or more services a Sunday. Remember when ministers had authority; remember when there was nothing else competing with the church on a Sunday or the church was the centre of the community. Remember when we were valued, respected as a church?

The line between remembering and nostalgia is a fine one. Remembering may give us a sense of pride and celebration; a glimpse of the story of the followers of Jesus down through the context of history. And remembering may help us feel a sense of belonging to something bigger than our own limited reality. Nostalgia on the other hand risks running us into seeing our present time only through a lens of impoverishment—like the best of who we are is past and what lies ahead is further erosion into God knows where. Nostalgia kills hope (Diana Butler Bass).

I believe those who have been preparing our resources and inspiration for our 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a church are calling us to **remember**, **renew** and **rejoice** so

that we step into the future with hope, expectation and in love with the church whose holy ground we stand on.

You have heard me say that at almost every further study event or workshop I attend these days the church as a whole is bent over with the burden of figuring out how to be the church in the era we find ourselves in. And there are always many present lacking in any kind of hope for our survival. Personally I find myself wondering what it would have been like to minister in a previous era. Recently I was reminded that every generation feels as though their time is the hardest time to live within. No one has it in quite as complex a time as we do. This is simply not true—the straightforward realities of previous generations only come about in hindsight. This was evidenced in a conversation Ray and I were having as we compared my ministry now with his of years past. I was guilty of saying: I wish, in some ways, that I could have worked then—when people just came to church because that is what you did on Sunday rather than now when it seems we have to contort ourselves to appeal to anyone. Ray clearly reminded me in that so-called easier era of the challenges of ministering after the Great Depression; World War and in the post war era of new found wealth.

The task is not to be the church only in the ways it has been done in our history but with the same faithfulness in a different time.

In fact our history may prove to remind us that there was no era where being a follower of Christ's way was straightforward. In Luke we read of Jesus original commission of the seventy out into the world to live God's way. The 70 was meant to represent all the nations of the earth. And listen as he describes to them what being the church is going to be like—*I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no bag, no sandals and greet no one on the road.* He continues to describe that they will be at the mercy of those who host them and if they are not made welcome...to shake the dust from their feet and move on!

This doesn't sound like being the church was at its prime. Lambs in the midst of wolves. No guarantee of reception. No clarity of what they will encounter. Simply that they are to carry out a ministry of healing, blessing and proclaiming the nearness of God's realm.

I firmly believe that the United Church has taken that call to ministry, first issued in Luke, seriously in its history—and that is why I love this church. We continually ask the question: How do we live God’s ways and go where Jesus sends us? We have continually asked the questions even amidst controversy and when it would have been easier to hide away in fear. So the question presents itself to us on the occasion of an anniversary—not only how has the church done this in the past but how will we do it in the future? In the now. In his sermon to celebrate the anniversary of the church, Bruce McLeod, a former moderator said:

*“The way we tell we are Jesus’ church...and not a museum or a club, is when we ask ourselves: ‘If our church were lifted off the ground and disappeared, would the streets around it and the world beyond sag noticeably for lack of love?’”*

After eighty-five years in the United Church, the answer, according to Bruce, is that **Yes** they would. Hungry children would be left unfed; older people left unhoused; the exploited Earth would be left with fewer prophets calling us to live with respect in creation; our broken family in Haiti left without United Church hands there within hours of the earth shaking. To his list I would add: fewer refugees would find hospitality; fewer homeless people would find a pew to sleep on and many children would miss out on learning that they have as much to teach us about God as we them.

In the United Church we haven’t always gotten it right; and sometimes done far more harm than we have ushering in the realm of God—but lives have been nourished; leaders have been formed and many of us still sit here because we, and our families have been embraced by belonging.

Leonard Sweet talks a lot about finding our mission in the time and place we are at. He confessed, in one of his lectures, that if he had gotten to choose he would have picked the Victorian Era to live in and be a Christian in. The attributes of the times are much more appealing to him than ours. He says he even surrounds himself with Victorian décor in his house in a romanticized appeal to the era. But God didn’t bring him into being in the Victorian era; God brought him into this time and place. So he says, I have to ask—what does it mean to live and believe in the gospel here and now? What does it mean to be commissioned now. That

discernment is our task. As the United Church feels its aches and pains at the age of 85 we don't have any idea what the future looks like and we may feel overcome by erosion and crumbling. Will we continue to prop up the walls that hold a history of faithful footsteps—or will we become smaller and smaller pushing ourselves to share resources; shaking the dust from our feet to walk new paths. Will we be able to recognize ourselves in a few years or will we look remarkable different. Will we need to die to ourselves and wait for God to surprise us with new hope? Will common culture excavate over us so we disappear all together

Perhaps we share the same urgency with those first disciples—go where you are received and where you are not—move on. So too we share the same certainties as those first disciples and all the ones down through the 85 years of our life together—the harvest is plentiful. We are bearers of a richness in a society that often only sees scarcity. The same Spirit who hovered over the baptism of the Church Fathers and Mothers hovers here. God is going to be about God's work with or without us—but we have always been invited to participate.

An anniversary can be an excellent exploration into where we have come from. And it can be an opportunity to ask—what next?

There is a poem that speaks to the things that hold us throughout our history and into our future. It is called *The Way It Is* (by William Stafford):

#### The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

I do pray...that we claim from our heritage not nostalgia but deep celebration and witness and that whether these walls crumble around us or not—that when those who stand in the future sweep the dust aside they will find holy ground where our faithful footsteps have walked—where we have trusted in God’s vision. And when they do stand on this ground there they will find their heritage and be invited to walk in their own time.

\*Image: Milan Baptistery, [www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/milan](http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/milan)