

**UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA  
ANNIVERSARY WORSHIP  
JUNE 17TH 2012**

**Call to Confession:** Sisters and brothers, we know this to be true: together we can face things we dared not face alone. Let's come to God in confession.

**Prayer of Confession:** God, you gave our ancestors a vision of unity; all your creation living in peace and health and wholeness. Too often our world is a place of division. Forgive us and show us the way.

SILENCE

God, your precious child Jesus, before he died for your vision, prayed that his followers might be one.

Forgive us when your church has been a place of division too: of agendas, personal and political, of judgment and power used not to free but to control. Forgive us and show us the way.

God, you have called us to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with you. Too often we have lost that call. Forgive us and show us the way.

You have called us to give voice to the silenced; yet we have often spoken to hear the sound of our own speech. Forgive us and give us voices for you.

God, you have told us to seek the welfare of all those with whom we share this planet. Forgive us – we have shamefully and shamelessly pursued our own pleasure and convenience at others' expense. Show us the way.

Hear us now in the silence of our own hearts

**Assurance of Pardon:** Listen, there is good news. God loves you very much and no matter what. God is always there for you: calling, forgiving, freeing....and giving you just what you need right now to be God's free, joyful and faithful people. Today – RIGHT THIS VERY MINUTE - can be a new beginning. The future is open; you are free to choose the way of life. And God is with you every step of the way. Let's sing our joyful response.

**Sermon:** (having given the background of the text from the time Israel demands a king....Saul goes out to get the donkeys...he's from the tribe of Benjamin the smallest tribe, and his family is the least important, Saul himself says.....Saul anoints him....(read verses 9: 10-11, 10: 1, 11-16 (he doesn't tell about being king!!) read 10: 17-27 really good. ....bloody battles Saul leads against the people whose land it was originally, Samuel, chapter 12, still maintains that it was a mistake to ask for a king....Saul has a son Jonathan who will become important later but for now we learn that he is a good warrior as well....In chapter 13 Saul takes the duties of the prophet/priest upon himself when Samuel doesn't get there as soon as he wanted....this, the author maintains, is the thing that finishes Saul as a dynasty. He is NOT the king they had hoped; he had not obeyed the law of God and had taken too much power to himself. There is always a priest or a prophet to hold the king to account. This is not the norm in the ANE at this time – quite the opposite, but for Israel is it A KEY CONCEPT. THE KING IS NOT THE RULER OF ISRAEL, GOD IS THE RULER AND THE KING GOD'S SERVANT, SUBJECT TO GOD'S LAW. There is always a priest or a prophet to hold the king to account. When the temple is built, and the king lives in a palace. the prophet lives there too.

Even so, Note as well that throughout scripture there is a continuing voice of protest....against having a king at all, against trying to be like everyone else, against that kind of concentrated power. Many of the books are written with that voice....critical of the monarchy, not just individual kings but the whole concept. Freedom and order, how should power be distributed, who has the right to make decisions and to speak for God....these are constantly in tension through the Bible - it is FASCINATING.

Through Saul's time there was constant war with the Philistines, and in an astounding and disturbing passage, God tells Saul to attack the Amalekites and spare no one. Saul in the end spares the king, and keeps the animals ...and it is this that makes God go to Samuel and say "I made a mistake we need a new king". We'll talk about that idea of God wanting war and killing as we go on in this story this summer. For now, I'm telling you how this book reports what happened.

## DAVID STORY

So – what are we to say to these things? And what does this have to do with us and the United Church of Canada as we celebrate an anniversary?

I want to go back to the tension between freedom and order – the questions of how to organize ourselves and who speaks for God how to discern God's will....

May I just say that in the United Church of Canada there has been from the beginning a deep desire to live out the unity that Jesus prayed we would embody. That all may be one he prayed. God forgive us – but we try.

When the UCC was formed it was one of the first in the world. It was BIG news. In 1925 You could still assume in this country that most people were Christian and wanted to be part of a church. The vision was that we would united all the churches who wanted to be One (and really who wouldn't, they figured?) and we'd be a voice for God in this country. Like the prophet in the palace. Calling the government to honesty and truth and justice and mercy and peace. To God's way. That's a beautiful thing.

Of all the other things I want to say today I want to say this: they knew and said out loud and in our official documents – they said "we do not have the full truth. No one does. We will set down as our beliefs and our practice what we believe to be true right now in our own time and it will be the duty of succeeding generations to seek out the will of God for themselves and to change our passionate and partial vision as God continues to reveal the truth to them.

In music, in worship, in polity, in how we understand God and ourselves and the world around us they believed that we would change and should change as the years went by.

Why? To be like other nations? NO – because God is still speaking still active and still teaching us new things. One of the old, old hymns has this verse:

*new occasions teach new duties  
time makes ancient good uncouth  
we would onward still, and upward  
who would keep abreast of truth.*

I'm proud to be part of a tradition like that.

I'm proud to be part of a tradition that purposely, deliberately and in the name of Jesus welcomes everyone - makes room for all kinds of belief and those who don't know what they believe - those who are seeking, those who are wondering, those who need a safe place to wonder and doubt and be held by a community that knows the value of those things. A community that draws the circle wide then draws it wider still. Not out of weakness or as a sign that we don't know what we believe

but as a sign of strength in the firm belief that everyone - EVERYONE is a child of God and precious. That was built into the very fabric of the new 1925 church from the beginning. I am proud to be part of a tradition like that.

One final thing – illustrated by two stories.

When you join denominations – it's hard. People gave up lots of really treasured ways of doing things, and buildings and made honest and brave sacrifices for the sake of the greater good. That all may be one was not just words...they were willing to put their money (literally) where their mouths were.

Example: church buildings: in old church buildings you can tell what they were before Union: Methodist churches are often circular and have rails because the Methodists were used to coming forward to the rail for communion. Presbyterian churches with the tradition of preaching as the focal point of the sermon often had pulpits high up....have you seen churches like that?

And Congregationalist churches were often simple and plain...

and in 1925 you had to choose now: which building are we going to use? You can see how that would test your vision and your commitment to this thing....

In Ottawa, when union happened, one Congregationalist church made room in the centre of their space for the Presbyterians to make the changes they needed to make to their building to make them feel more at home there.

And finally (you've heard me tell this before) the question was who would be the first moderator – the person who would go down in history whose name would always be remembered?

The Presbyterians put forward the name of George Pidgeon and the Methodists....Samuel Dwight Chown

...tell the story.