

Sermon: Who We Are

First United Church, Waterloo – Worldwide Communion Sunday, October 3, 2021

PRAYER: God of generous grace and steadfast love, let us know and feel the abiding blessing and transforming power of your Word, a Word that sustains us, guides us, and challenges us to live into your image in which we have been made. A word imaged for us and lived out in our midst in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen

Everyone of us, everyone who has ever lived before us, everyone now living on this earth, everyone who will yet come to experience life on earth and in this universe has a longing for validation and acceptance.

Who tells you who you are? Who tells any of us who we each are?

We get messages about that from parents, relatives, our peers and friends, teachers, co-workers, and also from our own selves.

A lot of them are not truly definitive because they are connected to roles we play, what we do, or the public masks we put on, but they are not who we are.

Many of those messages may actually be negative causing emotional scarring and personal harm. They serve to undermine our self-esteem and sense of personal worth.

People of faith also hear and discern that God, the Divine, has something to say about that too. I will come back to that momentarily.

But, I wonder about people who haven't had access to that Word, that divine messaging.

Where do they find, receive the affirming truth of personal validation and acceptance?

In our culture, it may be through the voice of poets and singers.

Maybe some found inner strength and encouragement a few years ago in a Katy Perry song:

"Do you know that there's still a chance for you? 'Cause there's a spark in you.

You just gotta ignite the light, and let it shine.

Just own the night like the Fourth of July!

'Cause baby, you're a firework! Come on, show 'em what you're worth.

Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh" as you shoot across the sky

Baby, you're a firework! Come on, let your colors burst

Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh"! You're gonna leave 'em all in awe, awe, awe." 1

Or, even more recently, soul-support is found in one of Pink's latest releases:

"I wish someone would have told me that this life is ours to choose.

No one's handing you the keys or a book with all the rules.

The little that I know I'll tell to you,

When they dress you up in lies and you're left naked with the truth

You throw your head back, and you spit in the wind. Let the walls crack, 'cause it lets the light in.

Let 'em drag you through hell, they can't tell you to change who you are

That's all I know so far.

*And when the storm's out, you run in the rain. Put your sword down, dive right into the pain.
Stay unfiltered and loud, you'll be proud of that skin full of scars
That's all I know so far. That's all I know so far."* 2

Noble words, all of these, words worthy of some attention and worth imbibing.
They affirm personal worth on the honest basis that each of us is a human being.
As my spouse and I entered a restaurant the other day to have lunch with a friend
(before we needed a vaccination passport), a sign in the entry way caught my attention.
It read: "Human Being: try to be both".
Does that suffice? Is that enough?

For people of faith there is more. There is a larger, even more affirming message.
It is the Word of God, from the heart of the Divine, that sings: "made in God's image".
That, in the spiritual nudge offered through an apostle named Paul, becomes voiced as:
"let us put on our new being in Christ". 3

This is a Word, a message of affirmation for every human being
not only that they are valued as they are, but also that there is a potential within
for greatness, for wholeness, for a fullness of being we can call the True Self.
It's part and parcel of other spiritual traditions too.

A member of this congregation was listening recently to a native elder relating
the Creation story treasured and passed on in his first nation.
"In our tradition," he said, "after the Holy One, God, made humankind, God said, 'Perfect!'
What have we done to lose that?"

I wonder if some of us have allowed other non-definitive or negative messages to override it.
I wonder if others of us, maybe most of us, shy away from our own greatness,
settle for less, and, in an effort to remain humble, sell ourselves short.

People of faith still have this magnificent, powerful Word to get out and to live out
in a world where so many, many souls including our own need to take it to heart and own it.
In the words of Gene Marshall, a pastor in Texas:

*"The plain truth is that 14 billion years of cosmic emergence and three and a half billion years
of evolution has gone into producing we human beings.*

*The plain truth is that we humans are the self-awareness component of this amazing planet.
The plain truth is that underneath all our self depreciation and minimized responsibility
each of us is a very capable and powerful being with amazing potentiality for aliveness,
compassion, justice, and so on."* 4

Taking that God-given truth to heart begins by realizing that our own validation
is under-written and sustained by a Source of affirmation and unconditional love
at the heart of the universe. Some name that Source God.

Theologian Paul Tillich named it "The Ground of All Being" whose grace is universal.
A few phrases from one of his sermons published over 70 years ago still have resonance:
"Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

*Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything.
Simply **accept the fact that you are accepted!** If that happens to us, we experience grace."* 5

You, the congregation of First United Church, Waterloo, took the courage a few years ago to declare yourselves to be an Affirming Congregation.

That signifies that “affirmation” is quite likely a core value within this community of faith. Living out affirmation begins with self-affirmation: each of us as valued and loved by God. And that Word still needs to be widely shared in the community and world around us.

We have this good news to communicate, to embody, and to demonstrate.

For how will people who don't know about a God in whom they can trust and find strength hear, if we don't share it?

Writing to believers in Rome, Paul the apostle echoed the age-old words of the prophet Isaiah:

“A sight to take your breath away!

Grand processions of people telling all the good things of God!”

Or in older translations: *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings!” (Romans 10:15; Isaiah 52:7)*

II AND STILL MORE...

Affirmation only begins there, the extent of its reach and impact is much, much larger.

Affirmation has a travelling companion: “inclusion”.

This too would seem to be value held in the core of this congregation's consciousness and sense of purpose.

Who tells us who we are?

Our cultures and their systems do. Often in disparaging, dehumanizing ways.

Cultures and societies that arrange themselves around protection of privilege are unjust and sick.

There is sad history of people being defined and devalued by codes and legislation such as:

The Indian Act in Canada, apartheid in South Africa, the caste system in India, slavery in America followed by Jim Crow laws in Southern states.

Isabel Wilkerson's recent study of caste in America, which some of us have read, casts bright stage lights of exposure on the persistence of this form of exclusivism.

Only in recent centuries have women and children been regarded as persons with human rights.

Legislative protection has not yet fully guaranteed altered behaviours in those who oppress them.

Persons who don't identify with heterosexual sexual expression, or with male or female gender have also only recently sought and been granted valuation as persons.

Societies and cultures and institutions around them haven't all yet made that shift.

Sadly, that includes some communities of faith.

Our denomination along with others, however, has plunged into the waters of inclusion.

We find it modelled in Jesus who inter-related with all classes of his society, who ate and drank with, and often healed and transformed the lives of outcasts, who had conversations with women in public, included women in his own inner circle, who welcomed and valued children, and extended the love and blessing of God to Gentiles.

We find it encouraged and commended by Paul the apostle, who wrote to believers in Galatia:

"Faith in Jesus, the Christ, is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are Jew or Greek, an enslaved or a free person, a man or a woman." (Gal. 3:28)

This is not an exhaustive list of human diversity, but a sample that by extension can be applied to the whole range of humanity. Even beyond using faith in Jesus as a qualifier.

That's how we interpret and envision it.

That's regarding everyone as heirs to the promise given to Abraham to be blessing to all peoples.

That's how, in becoming an Affirming congregation,

First United has made it publicly known that living into full inclusion is a shared intention.

Inclusion is about extending our own self-affirmation as persons to all other persons, to the entire, fascinating, and wide-ranging diversity of humankind.

Inclusion is about accepting, valuing, and celebrating others as persons without using any categories of distinction

such as ethnic background, skin colour, age, height, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

It's a challenge because even our best efforts among those of us who are privileged can become tainted by our own unconscious, unacknowledged, or unthinking bias towards less-privileged persons in our culture.

It's a journey we're still on. There are still more shifts and moves to make in the language we choose to use, in the actual structure of this church facility, in the manner in which we do inter-relate with and accept the gifts that all others may offer us.

It is indeed a challenge, but one worthy of Christian hearts and lives intent on being wide, affirming and inclusive.

CONCLUSION

If affirmation and inclusion are indeed part of our core values, they are a significant part of the good news we have to share and the ministry and mission we feel called to live out.

Let us seek to do so in whatever ways, with whatever words we choose.

Maybe we relate our gospel message to songs in popular culture, or motivational talks, or other similar meditative words aired by others. Share the good news. Be the good news.

During a recent gathering of our Let's Talk About It group, our facilitator Walt Brooker shared these words of British author, Matt Haig. *(Read by Madeline Galt)*

"It's okay to be broken. It's okay to wear the scars of experience. It's okay to be a mess.

It's okay to be the teacup with the chip in it. That's the one with the story.

It's okay to be sentimental and whimsical and cry bittersweet tears

at songs and movies you're not supposed to love. It's okay to like what you like.

It's okay to like things for literally no other reason than because you like them and not because they are cool or clever or popular.

It's okay to let people find you.

You don't have to spread yourself so paper thin you become invisible.

You don't have to be the person always reaching out.

You can sometimes allow yourself to be reached.

As the great writer Anne Lamott puts it, 'Lighthouses don't go running all over an island for boats to save; they just stand there shining.'

It's okay not to make the most of every chunk of time.

It's okay to be who you are. It's okay". 6

Whatever words and deed we use. Let us persist. Let us not give up.

Let us not tire of getting out and living out God's gracious, affirming, and all-embracing Word.

"A sight to take your breath away!

Grand processions of people telling all the good things of God!"

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings!"

Notes

1 Songwriters: *Esther Dean / Sandy Julien Wilhelm / Tor Erik Hermansen / Mikkel Storleer Eriksen / Katheryn Hudson* Firework lyrics © Peermusic Publishing, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc, DistroKid.

2 Songwriters: *Alecia Moore / Benj Pasek / Justin Paul*
All I Know So Far lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

3 *Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10-11; cf. Romans 13:14.*

4 see *Gene Marshall, Realistic Living* post at
<http://www.realisticliving.org/koob/GreatParagraphs/GP2-3TillichGrace306.pdf>

5 from an essay by *Paul Tillich* entitled “*You are Accepted*” which is Chapter 19 in *Tillich’s* book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations* published by *Charles Scribner’s Sons* in 1948.

6 *Matt Haig, The Comfort Book*, (Kindle edition, Penguin Life, London: July 2021), pp. 10-11.