

“Becoming Communitas”

Tim Schmucker: AGM Sermon

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Acts 2.44-47; I Corinthians 12

Little did I know. Little did I know a year ago of the transformation in my faith that was awaiting me. For several decades, I had strongly believed that as a church we urgently needed to totally revamp our faith language, because our traditional theistic language threatened to make us increasingly irrelevant and archaic in our diverse post-modern, post-Christian context. Comprehensive post-theistic faith language was the key, I thought, to our thriving as a congregation in the decades to come. I confess to you now that I’ve come realise that while language is important our faith is much more than words, and TUMC’s thriving is all about our being a vibrant community in all aspects of our life together.

Little did we know. Little did we know a year ago of the journey awaiting us. One year ago today as incoming Board chair I shared some disquieting words with you, words based on the assigned lectionary passages. They were: “darkness follows light.” We were entering 2016, an "implementation year," on a high note: We were about to open Aurora House. We were gearing up to welcome the Middle Eastern refugees we were sponsoring. And we were anticipating finishing our building expansion and renovation project to make our congregational home more welcoming. With skilled and committed leadership at all levels, we were thriving, confident. Yet, the message from the Biblical texts that Sunday morning was “uncertainty follows confidence,” that we be prepared for some difficulties, that things don’t always go as smoothly as planned.

Little did we know.... Of course, we couldn’t have anticipated the journey we would embark on mid-year with our pastor Marilyn and her coming out story. Yet, those scriptures had an additional message for us, that during times of uncertainty and confusion we are to remember that we aren’t alone; that our faith and the Spirit guide us and give us strength; and that light also follows times of difficulty. That message, theoretical then, became quite real for us as we journeyed together through the summer and fall into winter with our faith and the Spirit indeed guiding us.

And then two weeks ago, Marilyn resigned. Our responses and reactions have been as diverse as we are. And while we have entered another stage of our journey, wondering what's next, we are not unmoored. We are not unmoored. The same faith and Spirit continue to walk with us and guide us. And we have a dedicated Reference Group working with L3 to shape our next steps. In short, we will continue to thrive as a faith community.

Yet thriving won't happen automatically. This morning as Board Chair I want to share with you some thoughts and reflections on what I sense we are called to focus on in the coming year in order to keep thriving as a community of faith, in order to continue becoming fully church. While this sermon was not planned as part of the preaching team's current series "Credo: Faithful Moorings," I think it fits well, as our ecclesiology, our understanding of church, is one of our faith's core moorings.

So how do we become more fully "church"? Our Toronto Canada post-Christendom context imposes numerous weighty challenges on us. No longer is the Christian story at the centre of our society and culture. Pluralism is our norm. No longer is involvement in a congregation an activity of the majority of our neighbours and colleagues. No longer are church buildings the centre of our neighbourhoods' activities -- unless of course they've been converted into condos with a first floor LCBO or Shoppers. Moreover, even for those who are "Church-involved," church is just one of a host of professional, civic and leisure activities that vie for our attention and commitment. As Craig so helpfully described in his sermon a month ago, we are fully in "The Secular Age."

And in this secular age, Canadians involvement in church has plummeted. Joel Thiessen is a Canadian sociologist and professor at Ambrose University in Calgary, and has spent his young academic career studying and trying to understand this decline of Canadian engagement in all things church. In his 2015 book *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*, Thiessen explores the various reasons Canadian participation in organised religion has been declining rapidly.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> His 2011 PhD dissertation at University of Waterloo took issue with pre-eminent Canadian sociologist of religion Reginald Bibby's optimistic declaration in 2002 that Canada was ripe for religious renaissance. Among Thiessen's reasons are: widespread rejection of Christianity's traditional exclusivity and of its doctrine and creed, along with geographic mobility and being too busy which result in the weakening of social ties.

I want to argue with Thiessen; I want to tell him that his book's title reveals his frame of reference – one that I don't share - that "practice of belief" is for "Sundays." But that would be a misguided focus on a book title that he likely didn't even choose, and thus detour us because the burning question for this morning, indeed for the coming year, is this: how do we as TUMC continue to thrive as a community of faith in our urban context, given our specific congregational setting at this moment?

Let's turn for a moment to our scripture passages for today. I Cor 12 and Acts 2.

In spite of all the trouble Paul had with the gathering of Jesus-followers in Corinth, his letters to them did at times rise above their discord with memorable Pauline images of what their gathering could become. I Corinthians chapter 12 is one such passage. Paul paints the image of the body of Christ, consisting of many members with a variety of gifts, all activated by the same Spirit and all essential in the working of the body of Christ. "Indeed," says Paul, "the body does not consist of one member but of many.... [And] If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it."

In our next scripture passage, the Gospel writer Luke in his second volume "Acts of the Apostles" paints a picture in chapter two of early gatherings of Jesus-followers. Yes, it's idealised, even romanticised. No, we aren't called to emulate the details across two millennia of history and culture. Yet still.... 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Acts witnesses to us in its vision of what the church is to become. Listen.

<sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

At its core, this scriptural portrait offers us this vision:

Those early Jesus-followers were together a lot, and shared all they had with each other.

They spent much time together in the temple where they worshipped.

They spent much time together in their homes where they shared meals.

And they grew.

So now let's turn directly to this morning's burning question: how do we as TUMC continue to thrive as a community of faith in our urban post-Christian milieu, and in our specific context? There are of course many approaches to and answers for this question. I'd like to offer three reflections that I believe will be core to our response. And these thoughts are more about "let's enhance and continue to focus on" rather than change or start something new, because we are already doing quite well as a congregation; we want to thrive even more.

First of all, I think we can enhance the way we dialogue and discern together. We will need deep dialogue with careful listening to each other as we move forward. The Reference Group and L3 will guide us as we process Marilyn's leaving and discern our next steps. This will involve hearing each other deeply, holding as holy our various and diverse feelings and thoughts, experiences and perspectives. So we need to enhance our capacity to listen carefully and respectfully to each other, especially when we disagree or don't understand each other's perspective or experience.

This capacity will be crucial for us as we move into the future. We need the capacity to have profound conversations on significant issues that face us. One such theme that has been part of our journey these past months is the nature of commitment in relationships and marriage: its emerging, developing and ending, along with sexual ethics within that context and beyond. We haven't agreed on the level of accountability and vulnerability we expect from our pastors. Do we require a greater level of accountability and vulnerability from them than from ourselves? What are the theological and ethical foundations of our position? When and how does marriage and covenant begin? When and how do they end? Our future pastoral candidates will want to know what we'll require of them, and what we expect of ourselves. Indeed, many of us wonder the same for ourselves.

We can do this. Of course, it's not simple or easy, but we're in a good position. Difficult conversations are not new to us. The past few years, we've actually done them fairly well, albeit too slowly for some at times. As a congregation, we've developed and practiced discernment and consensus during times of decision-making as we affirmed same-sex marriages, initiated

Aurora House and our building renovation and expansion, and this past November when we included welcoming LGBTQ folks in our pastoral hiring policy. Now we can enhance and practice these discernment and consensus processes in order to have honest and deep dialogue about what we expect from our pastors and from ourselves, and also about other burning issues. For example, how do we as Jesus-followers live in our world of global warming and with the hugely widening gap between the haves and have nots? And what do we do about our RRSPs saturated with Canadian mining and tar sand companies? Such dialogue and discernment will have significant impacts on our continuing to thrive.

Secondly, let's continue to grow our vocation and ministries of care and justice: caring for us and caring for others. Justice-making for us and justice-making for others. We already do much of this well. We care for each other through our Caring Team, via the many intentional small groups, and in personal friendships and mentoring relationships. I see evidence of this Sunday mornings during our sharing of joys and concerns and then during fellowship time when I observe numerous conversations going on where the theme is obviously not last night's Leaf's game or the latest theory of potential life on other planets. I see evidence of this when six vibrant young adults spend hours with our youth every week. When mentors hang out with their mentees. When I think about the hours every week that some give to take care of this building, the locus of our life together. We care as we walk with seniors in their golden years. We do care for each other. Deeply. But I'm concerned that all of us are cared for. Are we sure no one falls through the cracks? I'm not. Let's make sure that everyone among us of all ages always has someone and a space to say, "I'm struggling," whatever that difficulty may be.

We also care a lot for others: I think of the thousands of weekly hours over many decades given to walking with refugees as they adjust to life here; I marvel at those among us who open their homes to people in need of immediate housing. Organisationally we care for others via refugee sponsorship, Lazarus Rising, St Clair O'Connor, Aurora House, and partner organisations such as Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite New Life Centre and Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Often this care for others is, in itself, justice-making, especially when we speak truth to power, as was part of Lazarus Rising's street ministry. Advocating in the public square for justice

for the marginalised and for a fairer socio-economic system through strategic political engagement needs to be part of our care for others. And I think we can do much more. While we're excellent at helping those in need, we are less active in changing the structures that cause the need. Last year I saw someone wearing a button that said "Tax me – Eliminate poverty." When I commented affirmatively on it, the wearer took it off and gave it to me. Since then it's been laying in a back corner of my desk collecting dust. Is that us? Our theoretical commitment to justice metaphorically sitting inactively on a back corner of our community desk? I suggest to you today that we have lots of room to increase our advocacy for the marginalised and less fortunate of our society. Let's wear that button and others strongly.

And what about those among us? Do we care deeply and actively for those among us who face social and economic barriers of injustice in society and even at TUMC? Are we all even aware of the challenges some among us face? Several years ago I was viscerally shocked when someone told me in a hushed tone that she and her family struggled to join us every Sunday morning because they couldn't afford TTC tickets. This was a relatively simple situation as they were students. But what about systemic injustice? Are we aware of the systemic injustice some of us face? Let's become more attentive to the barriers of injustice we face so that together we begin to dismantle them.

Summarising reflection #2, I'm suggesting that by increasing and deepening our care for us and for others, seeking justice for all, we will significantly enhance our thriving as a community of faith in the years ahead.

I want to share my third TUMC-thriving point as a story. Actually it's a personal confession. As I began to share in this sermon's introduction, I have privately ranted to a trusted few about our faith language that for me no longer communicates with our 21<sup>st</sup> century context. For example: "Heavenly father" referring to God. Is God a person?, I would fume. Please let's stop talking about God as a being, I would rant. And where's heaven anyway? And I won't even get started on the substitutionary atonement that permeates many of our hymns, or our language at Christmas because if I did, we'd end up with a situation like when Jesus was teaching the multitude of 5000 and it became late, and there was no food. I doubt that any one

here has five loaves and two fishes in their backpack, and even if you did, who'd play the role of Jesus to multiply them? Don't answer; that's a rhetorical question.

In short, I was fed up with traditional theistic language that no longer resonated with us moderns and post-moderns, and I thought that what progressive Mennonite churches needed to thrive and be relevant was nothing short of a complete revamping of our faith language – in our worship, in our Christian education, and in our written statements. A language reformation, if not a revolution.

I confess to you today that I now believe I was wrong. Like the proverbial dog barking up the wrong tree. Not wrong in that our faith language isn't important. Not wrong in that we need to give careful attention to express our faith in ways that resonate. But very wrong in my conviction that a language revolution was all we needed to flourish as community of faith. While for years I have thought that sharpening our faith language, getting rid of archaic concepts that we no longer resonate with, was the key to our thriving, I've come to realise deeply that there's something more important, and that is our encounter with and experience of the Transcendent, the meta-mystery of faith. Encountering and experiencing the Divine in our life together – in our singing and worship, in our care for each other and others, in our service and justice-making, we deeply encounter that Mystery that for millennia we've called God and Christ the Logos.

I now see and understand that our words are simply our feeble human attempts to articulate a reality that is beyond articulation, and that our words simply point us toward the transcendent that is beyond words. So I sing with Canadian poet and singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn:

You can't tell me there is no mystery.... Mystery .... Mystery

You can't tell me there is no mystery. It's everywhere I turn

Infinity always gives me vertigo... Vertigo ... Vertigo

Infinity always gives me vertigo. And fills me up with grace

Don't tell me there is no mystery.... Mystery .... Mystery

Don't tell me there is no mystery. It overflows my cup

Then Cockburn ends with a gentle challenge:

So all you stumblers who believe love rules... Believe love rules ... Believe love rules

Come all you stumblers who believe love rules. Stand up and let it shine

[play 4.12 - 4.57]

So to conclude: in our deep dialogue and discernment, in our care and justice for others and for us, and as we encounter the Transcendent the Divine Mystery in our life together during the week and in our Sunday morning gatherings, we as TUMC are becoming *communitas*. Becoming *Communitas*. *Communitas* is an enhanced and vibrant community. The term comes from the work of Victor Turner, a giant in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century emerging field of ritual studies within anthropology. Turner, a committed Catholic, melded his career in ritual studies with Christian liturgy. I've adapted his work for our non-liturgical congregation. *Communitas* is a vibrant community. It's community taken to a more intense level. It's like the gatherings of the Jesus-followers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Acts and I Corinthians 12. *Communitas* is dynamic, whose life together is no longer calcified, but rather flowing and subversive, in process and in flux. In short, *Communitas* lives in praxis. It expresses its faith in daily life, and in turn is re-formed by this common life together. In *communitas*, our corporate and personal identities are simultaneously being expressed, lived out and reshaped. We are profoundly moulded by our life together which in turn shapes our being and living in the world.

*Communitas*!

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, For the dawn draws near, And the world is about to turn. In *communitas*, God the Divine Mystery is turning the world around. Will you join in? This is our faith! Participate in the turning – acting, receiving! The world is turning to God's justice! Let us be full participants.

TUMC – Becoming *Communitas*! Amen.

Hymn: "My soul cries out" (Sing the Story #124)