

2018 10 07 Lift Up Your Hearts

Toronto United Mennonite Church: Thanksgiving, Communion, Being Church Together. [Colossians 3:1-4 and 12-15](#)

*In this sermon I will discuss the 'Sursum Corda', the oldest piece of communion liturgy, and discuss the role of thanksgiving in the Eucharist and in the life of the church. I will propose that the giving of thanks is a good thing in and of itself, beyond the goodness of the thing you are giving thanks for. I will suggest that part of 'Being Church Together' is sharing our thanksgiving. Then I will detail some of the many things I am personally thankful about in TUMC specifically and show how participation in this church is a good way of centring thanksgiving in my life, not just of doing good but of being thankful for that good.*

Today we continue our preaching series 'Being Church Together', looking at the place of thanksgiving in the church, appropriate for the celebration of Thanksgiving tomorrow. Today is also the first Sunday of October, which makes it World Communion Sunday. Now, given that we celebrated communion last week with Irma Fast Dueck's speaking series, I'm going to assume that's just our Anabaptist way of being ahead of the curve. Irma's sermon last week is available as [an audio file](#) on the TUMC website. I'm going to be starting from her comments exploring Communion as an act of Thanksgiving, so I would encourage you to re-visit her sermon which goes into more detail.

Our ecumenical kindred who are celebrating World Communion Sunday today will be doing so in many different languages, using different forms of prayer, different types of bread, and different doctrine and ritual. But don't despair, we are not left out, just because we did it a week early. For Jan and I have sneakily infiltrated a short piece of the communion liturgy into our service today, which in one form or another will be spoken in churches around the world today.

Did you notice it? The Lord be with you. [...] Lift up your hearts [...] Let us give thanks to the Lord our God [...]

This short dialogue between the presider and the congregation is known as the *Sursum Corda*, after the Latin phrase that we get 'Lift Up Your Hearts' from. It is part of the longer piece that is often called The Great Thanksgiving, where the communion presider tells the story of God's love and faithfulness, summarizing the scriptures to remind the congregation that the service is a part of an ongoing relationship with God. In the service, the dialogue has the practical effect of focusing the congregation, and indeed, if you ever need to get the attention of a rowdy ecumenical crowd, yelling 'the Lord be with you' works wonders, even though the responses will differ from denomination to denomination.

And that function is not a surprise. The dialogue reminds everyone where their attention ought to be. Lift up your hearts - we lift them to the Lord. I came across some interesting variant translations, from the more accurate 'lift up our hearts', emphasising that this is a group activity, to the thunderous 'to heaven with your hearts!' and the direct translation which simply enough is 'Hearts up!'

Why am I mentioning this piece of the service? Well, firstly it is the oldest known piece of the Communion liturgy. It has no direct scriptural source, although it echoes various pieces of scripture.

Interestingly enough, when the prayer books were scoured in the Reformation, removing anything without scriptural backing, the *Sursum Corda* survived. John Calvin wrote that it reminded the congregation to seek Christ in Heaven, perhaps happy about redirecting attention from the Bread and Wine.

So it's very old, and very meaningful. But I was really drawn to it because it is the introduction to the Eucharist, meaning Thanksgiving. One of the questions that we have raised at TUMC is whether we ought to consider a more frequent communion as part of Being Church Together. I would like to suggest that, in as much as we make the giving of thanks part of our service, we are accomplishing part of the purpose of communion, and that's worth being aware of.

Let's consider that phrase 'lift up your hearts'. 'Hearts up!' As our scripture reading has it, '*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*'

What does it mean to lift up your heart? I think we are all very familiar with the use of 'heart' as a metaphor for the inner self. But what exactly? The soul? The spirit? The emotions? The experience of love? The inner dialogue and turmoil? A fist-sized muscle that can work continuously for a century? The metaphor of the heart can mean many things. What are we lifting up to God?

Of course, it's also a metaphor that God is 'up'. We would be equally true to say that God is with, within, around, between, below or beside. The imagery of lifting up is throughout scripture. We've already heard that the image of Jesus being raised up to heaven after his time on earth was in the minds of those who argued to keep this in the liturgy. For me, it brings to mind the mysterious 'wave offerings' mentioned in Leviticus, where the priests would take grain or loaves and perform a 'wave offering'. No one is entirely sure what that is, but imagine it involves lifting up.

Lifting up also mirrors the the belief that many have in communion that God is coming down, is choosing to be present to us in the simple, vulnerable form of bread and wine.

I suggest that in lifting our hearts to God, we are bringing our consciousness, spirit, being closer to God. Bringing your centre, your true and hidden self, in vulnerability, offering, tribute.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We lift our hearts specifically to God because it is right to give our thanks and praise to God. God is worthy of our thanks, collectively not just individually.

Giving thanks is a good thing to do. Sounds simple, but I want to emphasize it. *Giving thanks is a good thing to do.* If you do something nice for me, that's a good thing for me. If I thank you for it, that is another good thing for me. Thanking you lets me name that I need you. It lets me consciously acknowledge my own limitations and frailty in a safe way. And it strengthens the relationship.

You can find plenty of good clickbait lists of scientifically proven benefits of gratitude online. You can consider the emotional and relational benefits of it too. If I give you my thanks, it means I acknowledge that you have done something good for me.

On the other hand, if giving thanks becomes an expectation, it can be oppressive. It is a challenge for me to be aware of. I may believe that by helping someone perform a routine task that is easy for me but difficult for them, I am doing something praiseworthy. But if I expect to receive that praise from them, I place a burden on them. I am thankful to my friends with disabilities who have helped me to think about the emotional labour they must do to secure assistance for daily tasks that I barely think about.

I believe that church is a place where we we model, practice, and build relationships. Thanksgiving is one way that we do that. The many ways that people serve in this church creates an entire web of thanksgiving... if we choose to take advantage of it. When we participate in communion together, each person at the table is connected by bonds of grace and gratitude.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

This does not mean that everything at church is sweetness and light. LOL.

It also does not mean that we are required to give thanks for the things that are simply justice. Gratitude freely given is not the same as thanks that is owed. As a gay man I am deeply grateful that I can be at this pulpit. But if anyone here tried to compel my thankfulness, I would likely offer them that gift of Biblical sarcasm '*Even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from under the master's table*'.

Or perhaps:

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.*

So in that spirit, let me offer you my thanks.

I am thankful for the lights. I am thankful for the people who keep the lights on. The people who pay the electricity bill and change the bulbs. The people who keep this a comfortable place in as economic and ecologically sound way as possible.

I am thankful for the hearing loop system. I am thankful for the recording of the service and the way we make it available to those not able to be here with us or those who want to listen later in the week, or in the year. I am thankful for the ramp going up to the doorway, for the elevator between the floors, for the main level accessible washroom. I am grateful for microphones, and for the ushers who carry them, and for the sound board and the people who know how it works.

I am thankful for the welcoming of visitors, for offering those visitors the opportunity to bless the congregation with their greetings. And I am grateful that everyone is welcome here, whether they stand up and tell us their church, hometown, and list their relatives, or whether they sit quietly at the back and slip out before coffee time.

I am thankful that we take up two offerings each week, reminding us that nothing and no-one is too small to be counted in God's kingdom. I am thankful for the work that this offering supports.

I am thankful for artwork. On the walls, on the doors, at the front, changed from season to season or gradually supplemented over the years. I am grateful for '[Our Story in Our Stuff](#)', the research project that tracked the histories of the furniture and artwork of our shared sanctuary. To offer an anonymous quote *'I'm so glad I go to a church that would have an 'about art' page'*.

I'm grateful that I could have my marriage blessed here. I am grateful for marriages made and blessed here. I am grateful that this church has space for all kinds of families. I am grateful that this is a church that can bear separation and even recombination. To quote another anonymous commentator, this time from outside our church, *'TUMC is famous for couples divorcing, marrying new people, and everyone keeps going to the same church.'* This person was wondering if it was part of a church growth strategy...

I'm glad that I was welcomed when I arrived here as a single, foreign, non-Mennonite. I was invited. And I was fed. I needed a place to just be, where I could tell people I worked with Christian Peacemaker Teams and they wouldn't try to dispute political action as Christian witness. I was burnt out and exhausted from church and I needed a place where I could choose my own involvement. I'm grateful I was asked to volunteer, and I am grateful it was okay for me to say *'no thank you, I can't do that right now'*. And I'm grateful that a few years later, when I asked about helping to teach Sunday School, the Junior Youth welcomed me.

I am so grateful for the Junior Youth. For the leadership they take in crafting services and ministering to all of us, and to for the delightful tangents and baffling observations in our discussion time. I'm thankful for the people like me who are too old for the Junior Youth room but come to hang out and explore this Christianity thing together and find out what the church looks like in the small room with no windows or couches in the basement. And I'm thankful to the Junior Youth for helping me refine workshop plans, sermon ideas, and jokes. I'm looking forward to seeing you again at Advent.

I'm grateful for nametags, decorated and plain alike. I am grateful for mailfolders and church directories. I'm grateful that if you hang around long enough you get one whether you want it or not.

I am grateful that this is a church where children are welcomed. They can sit, they can squirm under chairs, they can be in the lobby and peer in. I'm grateful for children's times and activity packs and choirs. I don't know what goes on at activity period but I know there's a schedule for it so I'm grateful for that too.

I'm grateful for books. Rows of Bibles we can grab when we need to, chairs weighed down with hymnals, and hymnal supplements, and more hymnal supplements. I'm grateful for a library full of resources, a rack of magazines, colourful books on low shelves for little hands to take out and know that this is their place too.

I am grateful for the ushers and junior ushers, folding bulletins, welcoming people, making sure the offering plate makes the rounds and the microphone reaches speakers.

I am grateful for annual traditions, especially the ones that quietly name our values. For Peace Sunday instead of Remembrance Day every November, choosing to name peace as our goal and our method rather than risk endorsing the violent means of grasping for peace. For Eternity Sunday instead of Christ the King Sunday, where we remember with love those who have died, rather than celebrate a vision of our God using the language of earthly, patriarchal power. Don't get me wrong, it plays havoc with the ecumenical calendar, but I love this church because of it.

I'm grateful for the many ways this church records and communicates its activities - the monthly [Place of Meeting](#), the weekly email notices, the website and the Facebook group. I am grateful for the church staff, for midweek emails asking if I have a title for my sermon yet (I never do), for a small allocation of giftcards and tokens to be handed out to people who inquire at the church.

I am grateful that in this church, participation in worship takes many forms. There is space here for people to sit quietly, to sing off key, praise God, to pick up an instrument and play. There are songs in multiple languages with multiple parts and no one minds too much which one you pick or if you switch mid stream. There is space here for people to get up and walk around, to take time for themselves in other spaces, to laugh, to object, to weep.

I am grateful for prayer. For the sharing of joys and concerns. For the space to offer up our vulnerabilities and insights to the One who is present with us. I am grateful for the times of silence as well as the coordinated litanies, the sung prayers, and the spontaneous responses to hold space for each other.

I am grateful for the church beyond these walls. Small groups, prayer groups, study groups, group activities. I am grateful for the regional church, the national church, the global church. I am grateful for the ecumenical movement, the interfaith movement, the chaplaincies and caring societies and agencies. I can't even list all the agencies but if you go to the [Frequently Asked Question](#) page on the church website you can see a list of thirty acronyms and references to different church agencies, programs and ministries.

I am grateful for men, women, and gender non-conforming people.

I am grateful for men at this church. With a significant degree of trepidation some years ago I came along to a discussion group of a book on men's spirituality and found that I was neither bored, alienated or slandered unlike every other man-specific church space I'd experienced up to that point.

I am grateful for women in this church. Pastors, preachers, leaders, organizers. I thank God for you.

I am grateful for gender non-conforming people in this church. You are kicking at the walls that divide and showing us beyond a bright and bold field.

I am grateful for discernment. For Soup and Sophias. For congregational meetings. For the [TUMC 10 commandments](#) for good consensus based decisionmaking. And I am grateful for decisions. I am grateful for the rainbow by the door. For all the rainbows on Pride Sunday. For the years of work. For the healing ongoing, and for the learning still to come.

I am thankful that this is a church that takes our full beings seriously. It takes our bodies seriously. We are fed here. We shake hands or embrace. Sometimes we dance, or clap, or sway awkwardly. We grow up. We grow old. We get injured or become ill, and receive treatment and prayer. Sometimes we don't get better. We take that seriously too. We commit to welcome all those gifts as we take our bodies seriously, and I am thankful for that.

I am thankful that this is a church that takes our spirits seriously. We have art, music, work, silence, and green growing things. We make space for joy, grief, hope and uncertainty. We listen for the nods and nudges of God's Holy Spirit, anticipating the laughter that accompanies our serious planning meetings. We affirm the presence of the transcendent mystery among us even as we seek to do the best we can with our limited understandings. I am thankful for that.

I am thankful that this is a church that takes our minds seriously. We read, discuss, debate, question, ponder, and, occasionally, pontificate. We have education for all ages. We have library shelves full of commentaries. We have sermons with footnotes. We have lifelong students, everyday experts, and geniuses, all happy to make the coffee. This is a place where you don't need to check your brain in at the door, where you can disagree and it's not a crisis, where you can even say I don't know, and I am thankful for that.

I am thankful that this is a church that takes our relationships seriously. We have mentoring programs, formal and informal. We have committees and committees and committees that hold together our community in care and congregational life and gift discernment and pastor-congregation relations and Christian education and mission & service and I don't even know what else. We have groups and ministries and activities for all age groups and interest levels. And let's not forget, we have that most powerful and inexorable commitment that binds us all together in a community of mutual service: The Coffee Schedule, bringing us together in well-caffeinated fairly-traded accord. I am thankful for that.

When the Haudenosaunee gather, they don't just do a land acknowledgement. They take the time to give thanks, not just to the people who showed up on time and the people who set out the chairs and provided snacks, but to everyone and everything. They give thanks for all creatures in turn, all forms of life in turn, all teachers and elders, animate and inanimate, ancient and immediate. We had a taste of that at the beginning of the service. I am told that the full recitation takes hours, and to each one nya:weh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

That thanksgiving is always concluded with the reminder to all life that it was not their intention to leave out anything. In that same way I would ask your forgiveness for the many things in our community that I have not mentioned. I know that we will soon have a time for the sharing of our joys and our concerns, and I know that many of the thanks that we carry are expressed in the silence that connects us with God.

Lift up your hearts. It is right to give our thanks and praise. Amen.