

2024-11-17 - Sermon TUMC - Farewell/Retirement

My final Holy Longings

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I am deeply moved every time we sing this beautiful hymn (VT#44 We Long to Know Her). First I sense that the old harmonies may have fed the musical imaginations of my ancestors – it somehow lives in my bones in a way that I don't fully understand. Secondly because of the gorgeous lyrics by Jacque (*Jackie*) B. Jones where she expands our language for God, including by using feminine pronouns. Relatively speaking it's still such an unusual experience to hear God spoken of as a woman. To me it feels like a big wide window opening up in a stuffy room.

We are living in a time of expanding our language about God away from the patriarchal and dominating frameworks of male Kings and Lords. "God is beyond human categories and language. God transcends time and space, matter and thought, male and female. ... We can never grasp the fullness of God. [but] By expanding the images of God we experience in worship, we can explore this mystery"¹ and find new footholds to help us understand God in different ways.

How we talk about things matters. How we talk about God *really* matters. This is top on the list of my holy longings that I want to pass on to you in my retirement sermon. There is a time for everything, and this is my time to reinforce some of the things that I have been wishing for us. I will repeat myself.

First let me explain what I mean by holy longings. Marilyn and I, a few years ago went to a conflict transformation workshop that taught us that, when facing conflict, we need to get beyond the surface and ask: "What are the holy longings behind this tension?" There is usually a core need or desire, that even the people themselves may not fully realize.

¹ <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Expansive-Language-in-VT-2.pdf>

So we started using this term, holy longings, as a sort of shorthand to try to understand others and to call ourselves towards grace. This framing honours the sacredness of each one of us, no matter the behaviour. And grace towards others is never wasted.

You may have noticed that that phrase “holy longings,” now keeps on cropping up at TUMC every once in a while. Some of you apply it to me when I get particularly insistent about something (like projectors or cameras or broken podium lamps).² I think we own the phrase now, because, when I checked, that facilitator of that workshop, she doesn’t even remember using the phrase holy longings anymore!

This week I came across a journal entry from when I was taking on the full time pastor role here at TUMC. It reminded me that change happens like small adjustments to the rudder of a large ship. A small shift can eventually change directions completely. One of the adjustments to that rudder has been shifting some of the language that we use, it can help us to remain intentional about the values that we want to uphold.

An easy example is how we say “stand as you are able” – which makes sure we are mindful of those who may not be able to stand for whatever reason. Or how we invite visitors to introduce themselves “if they are comfortable” to express hospitality rather pressure. Or how we make sure to always extend welcome to people who identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, because – to put it mildly – they have not always been welcomed in church settings and Spirit has made very sure that they/you are included and affirmed here at TUMC. Thanks be to God.

Words of encouragement or gratitude to each other are also very significant in nurturing a culture of grace towards one another and bringing out our gifts and callings.

Words matter.

² The funniest application of the term holy longings was probably the time when Jon Brandt finally took down the unfixable brass podium lamp that kept blocking my view and the face of the shorter preachers on the zoom calls and left it on my desk with a note that read: “the detritus of your holy longings.” I felt so seen! :-)

Another of how I have been intentional in my use of language has to do with how I've chosen to celebrate communion all these years that I've been your pastor. You may or may not be consciously aware of it, so I'm going to show my work.

The invitation to the table always says "To those who are not ready to partake in this symbol, know that you are loved and welcomed by God wherever you are on your faith journey."

At every opportunity we lean into your belovedness, our belovedness by God, to counteract centuries of people being told that they are inherently utter sinners and not worthy of God's love. That narrative is not true, so if you remember anything from this sermon or any sermon I've ever preached: You are beloved by God with no conditions applied.

The communion prayers that I use are also ones that were developed by a group of Mennonite feminists a few years ago who were triggered by the implicit violence of some of the traditional liturgy. References to blood and sacrifice have been removed and the prayers speak about a mothering God.

Many Mennonite churches (ours included) have lost the rich practice of having a foot-washing service. When it was practiced it was a symbol of humility, vulnerability, mutuality and service to one another in the church. So I've added another small adjustment that is not usually a part of Communion liturgies. This is what I say:

When Jesus knew that his hour had come,
he gathered with his friends for a meal.
Getting up from the table,
he tied a towel around himself and washed their feet.
And, after he had finished, he said,
"I have set an example for you; do as I have done to you."

It is our reminder that Jesus calls us to leave aside hierarchy and to practice humility and service to one another. This is the building block of our church – whether we are doing the footwashing service or not.

So my deep holy longing #1 is that we continue to be intentional about how we say things and that we continue to use expansive language about God.

There was something else in that journal I told you about, a verse from Isaiah 57:14 ‘Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way.’ Beside it I had put a short note that said “my job description.”

Removing obstructions, that’s holy longing #2. Many of us have come from religious backgrounds that were a mix of values that we want to hold on to and other very harmful so-called “Christian” ideas that we really need to free ourselves from. Like all the shame and self-loathing, or the idea that humans must have dominion over the earth. Look where those have gotten us! So we remove the obstacles, we name those things that are stumbling blocks.

And so I’ve tried, especially in theological reflections, to stay in a posture of curiosity, to keep on removing obstructions, asking questions and making sure that we don’t throw out the proverbial baby while we’re busy refreshing the bathwater of our core beliefs. (Pop quiz: What does belief mean in the Bible: It means trust not dogma or doctrine or intellectual assent.) Belief means trust.

So, to quote another new hymn from Voices Together (440) I hope that you continue to Ask the Complicated Questions³ – that is the most faithful thing that you can do.

Ask the complicated questions;

Seek the disconcerting answers;

³ Text: David Bjorlin (USA), © 2017 GIA Publications, Inc.

follow where the Spirit blows,
test competing truths for wisdom,
Knock on doors of new ideas,
test assumptions long grown stale,

I've called my third longing: **Play with your bibles**

When I was a teenager I had my very own little blue bible that I would bring to church and read at home. The saying in my youth group was that the Bible needed to be like deodorant – always under your arm. It had a zipper and inside it had a pencil with red on one side and blue on the other. As a teenager I would diligently highlight verses that spoke to me in blue, and anything Jesus said in red. I was looking for where Jesus (or anybody in the Bible) had ever said “you must accept Jesus in your heart,” which was a common phrase at the time. It really bothered me. Guess what? Did I find it anywhere in the Bible? No, I did not. Let us cast that obstruction aside.

At TUMC we no longer have physical bibles at our fingertips here in the meeting space (well maybe on our phones?) and we only get projected excerpts in worship. So I want to tell you don't forget about the Bible! Don't let that be your only interaction with it.

Have you ever noticed how when Doreen tells the children bible stories with those little figurines they all seem to pay attention? It's a method called Godly Play. My favourite part is that it engages the Bible stories with wondering questions, rather than just assuming there is one “moral to the story” – there rarely is. Wondering questions like: I wonder what it felt like? I wonder what happened next? We also did wondering questions as our theme for Christmas Eve during covid. Those are the best kinds of questions.

What I mean by “playing with” the Bible is giving ourselves permission to visualize, break down, to question translations, contexts, to ask “who is missing in this story?”, and even not to like certain passages in the Bible that have caused harm. It's OK. This has been

enormously helpful in keeping many of the texts of the Bible as something worth engaging with and learning from. One scholar I know from my biblical storytelling circles talks about removing the layers or lacquer that have accumulated on our readings of the Bible.⁴ It's one of the reasons I enjoy learning Bible passages and telling them to you orally, because you have to think about them in a totally different way. And you don't get to argue about a story, you can argue about a word, but not about a story.

On a finer point, I also want to reassure you that it's perfectly OK in passages from the Hebrew scriptures to switch out the word LORD⁵ (usually identified in all caps) with other names for God: Creator, Eternal One, Divine Spirit, Almighty, - whatever name of God appeals to you, whatever aspect of God – and to stop using the male pronouns for God that are associated with the word LORD. You'd only be tinkering with the work of translators anyway, not with the original text. I have been fairly intention in using the Inclusive Bible whenever we can, which tries to un-gender God. That word Lord is a stand-in for the unpronounceable name of God. I guess this is more related to my first holy longing, about how we talk about God,

I've really valued how at TUMC we don't dismiss scripture, but we wrestle with it. I have loved preparing and delivering a storytelling concert on many of the party stories in the Bible. I loved listening to sermons in series like in 2019 Bearing Light: Women in Scripture or our most recent 2023 Character References where we revisited some of the key Characters in the Hebrew Scriptures. We can learn so much this way.

My fourth holy longing is that we continue to learn what it means to practice radical inclusion. This goes beyond our best words and intentions and comes at the cost of each one of us being willing to be changed. These are a couple of examples:

⁴ Marty Steussy

⁵ LORD in all caps stands in for the divine name YHWH (often pronounced Jehovah but this is not OK according to our Jewish siblings.). In Hebrew vowels were often inserted which turned it into Adonai (lord). So when LORD appears it means the unpronounceable name of God. (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hashem/>)

As a white relatively-privileged person who grew up in a different country, but with a foot in the culture here in Canada and among Mennonites, I can see that there is still more transformation waiting to unfold. We have very good aspirations, and an openness to trying some new things – food, musical styles, and to give opportunities to various preachers. Yet we keep on hearing from our siblings from different cultures that the dominant culture has a grip on how we operate and that it still exerts pressure to assimilate. We have more to learn before arriving at mutuality.⁶ We have a lot to learn from other worldviews, from other senses of time, other values. And we can make a greater effort to understand other accents and be open to other ways of doing things, even if that becomes uncomfortable for a bit. We can't forget to continue to embrace our sister church, The New Life Church with whom we share a history and a building.

The other space of radical inclusion has to do with LGBTQ+ inclusion. I long for us to continue what the Spirit has been working among us for the last 20 years or more; that we get beyond thinking of this as an “issue” or as a matter of justice – which it is – but that we come to enjoy the fruit of being truly open to queerness and how it might bring us richer ways of perceiving the world and our spirituality.

When I think about the journey that Holy Spirit has brought us on, I remember a banner that we used to have here. I think it was for Lent or Advent, and each week we would add a different colour. And when we got to the end of that series we thought it kind of looked like a rainbow. And so I asked someone to make the final banner that was red and actually turned it into a rainbow. That to me always represents how our church has come to be affirming and accepting of LGBTQ people. It gradually built up until we got to the point where God has called us to embrace this identity.

God has blessed us with diversity here at TUMC, I long for us to continue to be transformed by its gifts.

⁶ See here for a sermon on mutual conversion by Pablo Kim <https://www.tumc.ca/?p=4030>

The final holy longing I'm going to name today – I still have so many more – is “don't forget to pray.”

There have been difficult times here in Ministry and I have a group of people that I can just pick up the phone and pray. Church work cannot be done without prayer. You also have endured me trying to bring the Taize experience to you. And if you think that was about music, it was not. It was about prayer. Trying to enter places of prayer that are unfamiliar to us and beyond our heads and experience.

I have a distinct memory from when I was about 7 years old. We were organizing a picnic with our neighbours and I was so very excited about it! Then I looked up and saw gray clouds. Oh, no! It looked like it was going to rain! I remember myself lying down in the grass in the backyard and looking up and praying desperately to God to stop the rain, pointing out helpfully how important the picnic was and for God to please not let it be spoiled. Then I had a thought “what if someone else at that exact moment was praying for rain?” How would God handle this?

Later at the picnic it just started to sprinkle a bit – not enough to ruin the event. I thought, “Wow, what a brilliant solution God had found! God was a genius!” My picnic hadn't been ruined and the people who prayed for rain still got it.

I pray that we continue to be surprised and continue to have eyes for the answers to our prayers.

We use the word discernment a lot around here, which is another word for prayer. It focuses more on the part of prayer that is about listening for God. Discernment means relying on more than our own wishes, our own capacity, our own good judgments and our own opinions – and thanks be to God, we do have plenty of all of those.

Discernment takes into account other ways of knowing than just head knowledge.

It is about seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, it's about listening to others who are also seeking that guidance. It is at the core of how we aspire to make decisions by using consensus: prayerfully. So for that to happen we need to pray. Prayer is what keeps us from running a church based only on our own abilities. It helps us to become an organism rather than a mechanism.

My longing is that you continue to be intentional about prayer because it easily disappears or gets relegated only to the things we can name aloud during Congregational Prayer or thought of as something only pastors can do. We need to continue to pray at our meetings, before our services, when making decisions and when responding to requests. Prayer is a posture, it can take the form of lovely words, a song or a powerful silence that is held together. It's a way of seeing.

My holy longings for you in this last sermon, are that you expand your images of God, that you remove theological barriers by asking good questions, that you continue to interact meaningfully with the Bible, that you remain intentional about honoring all diversities and cultures, and that you continue to pray and to rely on Spirit's guidance.

You are a wonderful church, TUMC. And I am so very grateful to have served with you all these years. But there is a time for everything, and it is time for me to move on.

I take as my words what we already heard from the letter to the Philippians:

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.”

May the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit remain with all of you. Amen