

Sunday, JUNE 4, 2023

TRINITY "CELEBRATE and SING!"

Essex County UCC Worship Gesstwood Camp

"If Not Us, Who? If not Now, When?"

Mathew 28:16-20 Referring to Luke 2:41-47 John 2:1-11

What a joy it is when God's people join together in praise and prayer! How is everyone right now in this moment? Are you feeling the Spirit of God in this beautiful place made by the Creator's hand? Why are we here in the heart of Essex County Ontario gathered as The United Church of Canada? To give praise to God for God is worthy and it is with thanksgiving that we are able to worship the One who created us and redeems us through His Son Jesus!

How did we end up here together on this day in 2023? It started with a vision for the need to bring together United Church people after the separation everyone experienced due to the covid19 pandemic. What is also true is that many people have realized that even though we call ourselves United Church we really have not been the body of Christ united in faith due to governance structural changes, changes in leadership and various circumstances which have led to several churches closing their doors in recent years. With these things occurring there has been a major disconnect between our church communities and the people we have known as brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ. The pandemic just exacerbated this problem which we already knew was apparent- the United Church in Essex County is shrinking in numbers.

Since the pandemic many churches returning to in person services many congregations have not been at capacity seating. The Official Board of Glenwood United Church recognized this and said we need to do something about this disconnect, this non relationship with other UC's in the city and county and to hear the work, the struggles and the excitement of being in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is when Glenwood Church started hosting Essex County UCC meetings every two months- to listen to each other, to experience with others the concerns of being a church in this post pandemic Christian era. These gatherings were to also to work together to achieve something larger than what we might be able to do ourselves. Those attending committed themselves to sharing hopes, plans, dreams and what they believed to be

important. As we prayed together we asked the Spirit to bring about something new as we strive to fulfill the vision of being United and a Uniting church.

During one of these meetings I challenged those present with the following statement. The United Church of Canada will celebrate its 100th anniversary of Church Union on June 10, 2025. If we as United Churches in Essex County want to truly live out our faith, with the hope as our forebears did in birthing this Christian denomination, we need to take up the challenge to be and become one in Christ Jesus our Saviour. Today we are celebrating 98 years of faithful ministry through changing and challenging times. We need to do this. If we are not going to prepare and plan to celebrate our history, our present and future as the church to which we are called, who will? We cannot rely on the other church down the street to respond to the call of being United Church; our Creed tells us that we are called to be the church. So here we are representing 12 United Church congregations/pastoral charges of Windsor and Essex County and looking to renew the call to be the church founded on faith and growing in hope. From where does our hope arise? Where are we going as we seek to do God's work in this time? We look to Jesus Christ who challenges, teaches and calls us to be One with each other and one with Him.

Can you hear God? Really can you feel the Spirit moving amongst us now? Where is Jesus today? We are called to be the church-what does this mean in 2023 A.D.- that is in the year of our Lord? How are we to do this knowing that was occurring prior to the pandemic no longer works and that the church is becoming marginalized in our world? Why is it important to continue to be the church?

In Luke 2:41-47 Jesus is a 12 year old boy in Jerusalem with his family for the Festival of the Passover. His family is not the only visitors in the temple that day; they are not being asked to introduce themselves and stay for coffee afterwards but they are there for the purpose of prayer and learning. The temple is busy, the courtyard and streets are crowded with faithful people. Animals and people are everywhere as they prepare for sacrifices, worship and getting food to eat. It is warm and the smells are of food, animals, sewage in the gutters and it is noisy.

We then see a woman panicking searching for her lost son. Mary and Joseph have realized that Jesus is not with them in their caravan heading back home. They assumed that Jesus was with other families. This Passover festival was a significant celebration for faithful Jewish people.

Suddenly Mary sees Jesus and is overjoyed. He explains his whereabouts by stating that he was where he was supposed to be- in his Father's house. There Jesus had been learning and teaching with rabbis and scholars. Mary is unsure of what to say other than that for her it is too early. Jesus has not yet experienced his bar mitzvah but she also is not ready to see her son fulfill God's plan for the world. Jesus as a typical young person, may have responded to his mother, if not now, when?

What is occurring is a life changing event for this young person and he is surrounded by the people who are astonished with insights, questions and even teachings far beyond his years. But to Mary Jesus is still her young son and she is not yet ready to let go.

We jump ahead in Jesus' life to John 2: 1-11. Jesus is with his disciples at a wedding in Cana. He has been invited to share in this multi day wedding celebration. Mary his mother is also present. The celebration is filled with wine, food and dance and much happiness surrounds the newlyweds. However, Mary is connected to the host families of the wedding and learns that they are out of wine. For this to occur so early in the celebration means embarrassment to the families and that the wedding party ends. Mary tells Jesus the situation. His response is "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Mary looked in Jesus' eyes and said, "If not now, when?" She walks away from Jesus and tells the servants to do whatever he says.

Jesus tells the servants to fill purification jars with water and then draw some out and bring it to the chief steward who is in charge the celebration. The steward tastes the wine and announces that the wine is the best. The party continues on. This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry and word would soon spread of this first miracle.

We are in this moment over 2000 years later and still telling the story of Jesus as a child and as the one who performs miracles. But His story doesn't end there. Yes we like to tell Jesus' stories of his preaching, and teaching in narratives and parables. We cram in the story of his

passion from Palm Sunday to Good Friday and Easter and linger on the rest of the year because we are an Easter people. But we must focus on God's grace which is our fresh start.

C.S. Lewis states: that grace, the central Christian belief, is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. This fresh start is what we are called to do as we live out the test of life.

The test will measure whether you are an informed, engaged, and productive citizen of the world, and it will take place in schools and bars and hospitals and dorm rooms and in places of worship. You will be tested on first dates, in job interviews, while watching football, and while scrolling through your Twitter feed. The test will judge your ability to think about things other than celebrity marriages, whether you'll be easily persuaded by empty political rhetoric, and whether you'll be able to place your life and your community in a broader context. The test will last your entire life, and it will be comprised of the millions of decisions that, when taken together, will make your life yours. And everything, EVERYTHING, will be on it. ...I know, right? - (John Green)

So it is nice to be here- seeing the beauty of Gesstwood Camp, to hear music, to sing God's praises with familiar hymns of faith, and to pray and eat together. But so what? Why are we here?

We are here because Jesus has made a difference in your lives and you want to pass it on. You want to tell others of the freeing salvation of Jesus Christ and how lives change because God's Spirit dwells within you. It is not enough to just feel the winds of God's Spirit, we must sail as Christ leads us. Because if not us, who?

Matthew 28 states "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." In recent times the church has been viewed as stale, outdated, slow, irrelevant and lost in its focus. However our focus has not changed. Jesus is the One thing that is the Main thing which we need to tell others. We need to quit being keepers of the aquarium and instead, be shepherds of sheep and lead from the front. This is the purpose of the church. This is why we are here. Because if not now, when?

How are we going to do this? Become like FROGS- fully rely on God. K-n-o-w Jesus for who he is and what he has suffered for you. Enable the Spirit to move and guide you in all that you do every day not just one hour on Sundays.

What are we to do? We are called to be the church. To bring the message of the Gospel – good news of Jesus Christ- to the margins where we are now found. Christianity works best when under pressure. We the church are under pressure to tell the message and revive the Spirit within us and amongst us. Because If Not Us, Who? If not Now, When?

Let us pray:

Holy God of Grace and love, we praise you and celebrate your calling us to be the church; the United Church of Canada here and now in Essex County. Enable us to engage with others both familiar and new and encourage us as we share your message of hope, peace, joy and love. We are your faithful people, give us wisdom and courage so that we may spread your glory now and forevermore. Amen.

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