

Mind the Agapē

Good morning!

Today is focused on Social Justice. Specifically, the UCoL Social Justice and Outreach Program. It is about YOU. Your commitment to Faith in Action is changing people's lives throughout this community, the region and beyond. After the service, you will hear about SJO and some of the 40 partners UCoL works with to change the lives of real people.

In late September, we had a service about Fairness, Justice and Love. We shared our thoughts and concerns about these three forces. We found that Fairness and Justice can have different interpretations, based on our perspective. We all have our own perspectives. I will share some of the forces behind mine.

We found that Love stands alone as a unifying force.

This reflection is entitled "Mind the Agapē". Visitors to the British Isles will hear "Mind the Gap" announced at rail and subway stations. The gap is the space between the carriages and access platform. Today's "Mind the Agapē" has two meanings. The first is to be MINDFUL of any physical and emotional distance that exists between you and others. The second recalls God's directive to love our neighbour as ourselves and MIND, or care for, that relationship.

In ancient Greek, there are many forms for feelings which are Love, in English. That is one problem in translating the bible. Wikipedia says there are 3,283 languages in 167 countries that have active bible translation projects. In English, the number of printed translations and paraphrases is about 900. There is no universal set of words to fully describe all of creation's wonder and experience. So, by necessity, a human element must exist in some bibles, and perhaps in all of them.

Here are some of the Greek forms of Love:

- Epithumia: Legitimate physical desire (chocolate)
- (A)Eros: Romantic or sexual love ("WELL, Hello There!")
- Storge(gay): Affection/belonging, (family, even the weird uncle)
- Philia: Friendship & companionship (the men's breakfast group)
- Agapē: love's highest expression: pure, selfless, unconditional

Corinthians states Love is patient and kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Rather, Love rejoices in the truth. Love bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. Love never ends.

Agapē is God's covenant love for humans and their reciprocal love for God. It necessarily extends to the love of one's fellow human beings. In Matthew, Jesus states 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus was stating the obvious. It is not possible to truly love God and not love God's creations. We are not art critics saying God is a Genius, and God's white period was Absolutely Fabulous. But the black, brown, yellow and rainbow periods were lacking and not God's best work. Historically, it actually seems that white was the derivative work.

In their Fall 2019 meetings, the UCoL Board discussed the Affirm United processes to evaluate becoming an Affirming Ministry. The Board passed the following motion in December 2019:

"That our congregation begin an educational/discerning process as to whether or not we will become an affirming ministry."

An Affirm Team brought the congregation special services, surveys, presentations, workshops, “Lunch and Learns”, and email feedback. At the 2022 ACM, the congregation authorized the Board to make appropriate adjustments to the church’s Vision and Principles.

The Team worked with Affirm United and the Board on a revised Marriage Policy, Draft Vision/Principles and Actions for the future. The Board approved these at their October 18 meeting. As noted in the ENews, these documents may now be viewed on the Church website.

On November 26th, the congregation will consider and vote on both the revised Vision/Principles and a resolution to join Affirm United.

I joined the Affirm Team before it existed, at an early 2020 planning meeting. Bex started the actual Affirm team with Kieran, Nigel, Toni and me. One of us was not like the others. I had golden retrievers and the knowledge void. Each member was assigned tasks. I got the represent-my-demographic task.

I committed to one additional task: to show up. I attended 25 of the 26 meetings. Bex attended all of them, until health and personal circumstances prevented her from continuing, this Spring. She left an empty chair, and a critical heartbeat within the process. Over four years, seventeen people contributed to the Affirm Team. Deanna, Erica, Gillian, Sophia, Stacey, Ryan and I are the current Team.

My demographic was not the expected silver-threaded gang. It is a small subset, the depressed amnesiacs. I have lived my life with SDAM, a Seriously Deficient Autobiographical Memory. This means no memory, or at least no experiential memory. I have few recollections of my life’s experiences – no mental video tape or feelings. I have some memory snapshots, seemingly taken by someone else. Like eye floaters, they slide away if I try to look at them.

I have memorized a brief index of my life, with decades between some entries. I also know PI to eight decimal places. I used it to build an octagon picnic table during Covid. Life's lessons have somehow stuck to me and cast me into this bit of Silly Putty. So, like, I bounce well.

My focus just belongs to today, which is a very useful thing. I cannot share any part of any book that I have read or any movie I have seen. I recognize that I have heard many scriptures that are read each week. I can paraphrase a few punch lines, like faith, hope and love, love God and your neighbour, and seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

I do know Romans 5:20 which the King James Version ends with, "where sin abounded, Grace did much more abound."

This small phrase has supported me in over three decades of chronic depression. I used to think that chronic meant seriously debilitating. Chronic just means the depression hangs around – like that weird uncle I referred to earlier.

Romans 5 is an interesting portion of Paul's letter to the Romans. It is hard to read and was not read today. Paul talks about Christ dying for our sins and his resurrection. He talks about there being no sin without a corresponding law to define what constitutes a sin. That the law was created so that sin might abound. Not that the law led to more sin, but the magnitude of man's sin was more evident in its presence. In the law's presence, we fully see the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice.

Paul Tillich was a professor in theology and philosophy at various German universities before the Nazis dismissed him in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and then a professor at Harvard University and the University of Chicago.

The Shaking of the Foundations is a collection of his essays and sermons. In a chapter called "You are Accepted", he discusses Paul's letter to the Romans as dealing with the unimaginable power of separation and self-destruction within society and the individual soul.

Tillich uses the word separation to help interpret sin's meaning. To sin is to be in the state of separation. Separation is threefold: separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from God. Tillich believes this three-fold separation constitutes the state of everything that exists; a universal fact; the fate of every life. He describes Grace as the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is acceptance.

Tillich states that "grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life ... when we feel our separation is deeper than usual ... when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us ... when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted ... by that which is greater than you, ... do not try to do anything now ... simply accept that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace. We may not be better than before; or believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of separation. This experience demands nothing, no religious or moral or intellectual belief, just acceptance.

In the light of this grace, we see the power of grace in our relation to others and to ourselves. Such moments make us love our life, make us accept ourselves, not in our goodness and self-complacency, but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life. We cannot force ourselves to accept ourselves or compel anyone to accept themselves.

Sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say "yes" to ourselves; peace enters into us and makes us whole ... and our self is reunited with itself (and others). Then we can say that grace has come upon us."

About 20 years ago, I took a course called "Journey of Soul" with Mariana Harris, with whom Gillian had planned to visit Palestine. The course was held at the Vancouver School of Theology as a lay course. Its goal was to examine the personal traits that move each of us forward and those that hold us back.

Near the end of the last day, we were asked to privately shed two traits that held us back. We were handed two slips of flash paper on which to secretly write these traits. Flash paper vaporizes when held close to a candle flame.

I took a different path. I secretly wrote two words of what I SOUGHT in life – Joy and Hope. I held the Joy paper near the flame, and it disappeared instantly. The next note for Hope was soon gone, as well.

We broke for our separate lunches. The afternoon was to be dedicated to each of us offering a simple gift to a group pile for another to then take away. I was the last one to return from lunch. My usual seat was gone. I sat in the only available seat between two unknown ladies.

The lady on the left fastened something onto my sleeve. I looked down and it was a pin containing a single word – Joy. A short while later, the lady on my right put her offering onto the gift pile. It was part of a centerpiece from the restaurant where she just had lunch. It also contained a single word – Hope.

Sometimes, life's answers seem to come very slowly. And sometimes we find that they were there all along. I live within today and have learned to revisit negative thoughts on brighter days.

The United Church has been present throughout my life. I was in high school in the sixties and played weekend basketball games in the church gymnasium. The Sixties Scoop did not come to mind, then, or the part played by the United Church. The last residential school closed when I was 50. I would only learn and care about all this later in life.

My 1946 birth year coincided with the 1946 Revised Standard Version translation of the bible. It led to the 1960 United Church condemnation of homosexuality as a sin. This apparently had no obvious connection to basketball, so I missed that one, too. Fortunately, others were less oblivious, with United Church members organizing in the '70's and planting the roots of Affirm United in the '80's.

Two years ago, I produced A Timeline of LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit Justice in The United Church of Canada. It has been posted in our coffee room since October 2021. In it, you see lots of positive changes happening through the '80's and '90's. And that in 2000, the church finally affirmed that all sexual orientations are a gift from God and renounced its 1960 statement that homosexuality is a sin.

We are assembled here a generation later in 2023. I only have 24 hours to figure out "the meaning of life, the universe, and everything" before I am in another one of my Ground Hog Days. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy says the answer is 42.

Has God forsaken me? The Bible is complicated and 900 of them are English. All my soul and all my mind can barely cope with one chapter. Do all of God's works reflect Genius, or are there lesser works from God's off days? Is it that complicated? Or is loving God and my neighbour enough? Agapē. That's what Christ meant. Right?

On November 26, at 12:00 noon, a special meeting of the congregation will be held at this Murrayville site after the church service to consider a revised Vision and Principles and to vote on whether to join Affirm United. I only have one request for all of you.

To do what I have faithfully been doing for the past four years. To simply show up. To set a direction for the future of our church. Whatever your decision, Grace will abound.