

“Seeds”

You might have missed it, but last Wednesday was the 84th Birthday of the United Church of Canada. We are now in the beginning of our 85th year of life together. This year, at this place, people of different Christian expressions decided that they could join together, celebrate what they held in common, respect their differences and become a new United Church in North Delta.

If we were to look for the small seed that started it all we might have to go back much further than 85 years. The United Church historian John Webster Grant points out that over 150 years ago in 1844 John Roaf, the minister of Zion Congregational Church in Toronto, pointed to the signs that promised its coming: missionary advance; the spread of popular education and especially of Sunday Schools; increasing holiness of life; harmony among Christians; and the widening of economic opportunities.

They started to speak of building the kingdom of God. These words that you know, “Walk with me, I will walk with you, and build the land that God has planned where love shines through” had their seed planted back then. There would not only be a United Canada, but also a United Church of Canada.

They believed that the Kingdom would come through the defeat of the Antichrist, a virtual war against the forces of evil. Songs like “Onward Christian Soldiers” became the fighting songs for the Christian mission against the powers of evil, whether it be the beer barons, or slave owners, or the capitalist system. Back then the next hundred years would be the Christian Century, a time of missions, enlightenment, morality, harmony and economic justice. The church would transform the very nation of Canada. There would be, in the words of Paul, a new creation.

We became the United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925. In the 1930s enthusiasm for the conversion

of the world largely evaporated. By the 1950s the old moralism commanded little more than lip service, and in the 1960s the Sunday Schools, which brought in all the neighbourhood kids, collapsed. In the past decade the advent of the “no religion at all” group has brought the collapse of neighbourhood churches.

There are a few cracks in the vision, and good reasons for them. I would like to comment on just one, not that this is the most important or the only reason, but it is just the one I would like to comment on. At some point we ended up believing that we should believe all the same thing—that all differences should be overcome and that is what God wanted.

We have good scriptural warrant for that, for in John’s gospel was the foundational text for the United Church of Canada. The high priestly prayer of Jesus that “all may be one, even as the son and the father are one.”

Now some things we can take for granted—in our oneness of vision. The United Church is against gambling and every single member should be against it (and just in case you haven’t come around and are buying 649 tickets, check out the web site www.united-church.ca/economic/gambling). That is why we don’t sell tickets to raffle off quilts.

The official policy of the United Church on alcohol is abstinence. I’ll bet you didn’t know that; well I would bet you, but I’m against gambling. But that is why we don’t serve fermented grape juice at communion.

The reality is that we don’t all believe the same thing. But this is something we should celebrate.

Last month we celebrated fifty years of being Royal Heights United Church, and I do mean celebrate, for we had a great deal to celebrate. Royal Heights has been a loving caring community—in sickness and sorrow, you have been there for one another. In reaching out

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to the community—just caring for neighbours in need, you have been there. Spiritual development for children and adults resulted in three ordained ministers from this congregation and many faithful disciples. From the first seed that was planted at a little meeting at the home of Walter and Myrtle Hawkins to the last meeting of the worship committee that will take place at their home on the last day of June—this has been a garden where the holy has been upheld.

In the first century, a Roman scholar named Pliny the Elder wrote about the mustard shrub in his encyclopaedia that he named a “Natural History” He wrote: “With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health. But once it has been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed, when it falls, germinates at once.

Pliny the Elder then gives some growing tips. “Because of that tendency for mustard to intrude and mix with other plants it should not be planted in a garden but only in a larger field where it can be carefully segregated by itself”. So basically it is a weed, like a dandelion—great for salads as long as it is in someone else’s lawn.

For those that heard Jesus tell this story of the mustard seed, they would have immediately called to mind this prophecy from the prophet Ezekiel. “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.” (Ezekiel 17:22-23)

What is the kingdom of God like? A noble cedar on top of the mountain heights? No, says Jesus, it is like weed in the valley.

The mustard plant tends to take over where it is not wanted, it tends to get out of control and it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like. The kingdom of God is like that mustard seed with its fiery taste and healing properties. The Kingdom of God is pervasive—it cannot be contained.

A plant growing out of a seed is a mystery we take for granted. So for our modern ears we may need a more dramatic example. Brian Swimme is a physicist who uses poetic language to describe the creation of the universe. So imagine if you will the kingdom of God being like the creation of all that is.

Brian writes, “The most amazing realization we can have is that every thing that exists in the universe came from a common origin. The material of your body and the material of my body are intrinsically related because they emerged from and are caught up in a single energetic event. Our ancestry stretches back through the life forms and into the starts, back to the beginnings of the primeval fireball. This universe is a single multiform energetic unfolding of matter, mind, intelligence and life.

The fireball was a cauldron of creativity. In it were created all the elementary particles of the universe. All that exists was once one. Yet galaxies were created by the hundred billion, each with its hundred billion starts, And all of it dances, the stars swirling about each other, exploding, creating new starts, holding each other in the silence of the gravitational embrace.

Consider the development of a star. Imagine a vast dark cloud of hydrogen atoms stretching through millions of miles of space. Each of these trillions upon trillions of atoms is involved in an attracting activity for all the rest, and slowly begins to move. A common center emerges, and the hydrogen atoms begin to clump together. The growing pressure from the gravitational attraction enables the hydrogen atoms to fuse into helium atoms, thus releasing their hidden energy in a vast profusion of light emanating in all directions: the core of the star ignites and there is a star—a new creation. A cosmic wedding, the joining together of elementary particles, an act of love.”

The kingdom of God is like an act of love—it grows like a weed—it grows like the universe itself. May it be so with us as we continue to grow in God’s garden of love.