

“There is Room for All’
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, May 27, 2017

John 17:1-11

“All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been gloried in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

So that they may be one is on our United Church Crest – Ut Omnes Unum Sint – “That they all may be one”. I’ve been at the Annual Meeting of Toronto Conference for the past two days, up in Midland. And yesterday the court voted 93% in favour of the motion for Toronto Conference to become an Affirming Conference.

Affirm United is a justice-oriented organization of people in The United Church of Canada who work for the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the United Church of Canada and in society. Part of the wording of the Toronto Conference Vision statement is: “Resisting all forms of oppression, we welcome and celebrate people of any sexual orientation and gender identity, and those who are marginalized.”

In the background materials in the Conference Resource Book, marginalization was defined as ‘those who are marginalized because of sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental abilities. etc.’ (p. 81)

There was considerable discussion before the vote as to some of the wording in the motion, in particular the word ‘marginalized’, with many feeling that the word had negative connotations and were looking for a more ‘positive’ word to express those who find themselves outside the parameters of the ‘dominant’ culture.

As well, many voiced concern that Affirm United only speaks to the LGBTQ community. But after much discussion, the wisdom of the court believes that the definition of inclusiveness will be ‘lived into’, and more conversations about who is marginalized will continue to happen. Because we seem to live in a kind of a world where Jesus’ words, ‘so that all may be one’ just isn’t happening. And there will be more conversation.

One of the songs on a cd I bought yesterday from the musicians who looked after the worship for the two day event is titled: “Am I Welcome Here?” Written by Andrew Donaldson in 2003, it talks about a person entering a church for the first time. The first lines are: “I stand at your door, a stranger, no stranger to grief or fear; is a stranger welcome? Am I welcome here?”

One of the more difficult lines from one of the speakers yesterday, and which was echoed by later speakers, was when they spoke of going to a new place, or even one known well to them,

and that the reality for them is that they have to ‘leave a part of themselves’ at the door when they go in the church. If they were gay, they left that part of them at the door. And it became obvious in our table discussions that there are things that people leave at the door – things that are invisible, that others can’t see.

In between the times when the panel members went to the microphone to speak, we sang the refrain of Here I am Lord – 8 times we sang “Here I am Lord, is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my hand.”

Here I am. This is me. Whether gay, transgendered, hearing deficient, learning ability – no one is dis-abled but as Cassie, a youth from Tottenham United Church at my table told us, we are dif-abled.

Jesus welcomed and Jesus affirmed – those who were marginalized – those who were the last and least, those whom the culture pushed to the edges – and were not part of ‘so that all may be one’. It breaks my heart because I am beginning to see through new eyes how often we make room for just a part of you.

Rev. Michael Blair is the Executive Minister of the Church in Mission Unit of General Council. He said in his words to us, “The language of inclusion is the language of power”. Because someone has decided who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ – and that is the voice of the dominant culture. Michael is gay and black. He has struggled with how not all of his identity is accepted where he goes. He can be accepted for his sexual identity but not his colour.

After listening to Emily Heath, Basil Coward, Ann Harbridge, Dennis Posno, Sarah-Jane Watelenin, Michael Blair, Sharon Ailsworth and Major Neil Parker speak, this is what continues to stay with me in their heartfelt, real life witness to being part of what the dominant culture calls ‘marginalized’.

I leave part of me at the door. You do not see me for all that I am. You do not see my sexual identity. Addiction. Learning Disability. Hearing Loss. Physical Health issue. Mental Health issue. Poverty. Employment Loss. I leave those at the door. And yet they are a part of me.

Here is a summary of some of the things that the speakers left us with.

There is no room for me ‘at the table’ to eat with you because I cannot get to the room because it is upstairs and I cannot physically climb those stairs to sit and eat with you.

I am the Chair of the Council of this church and I have never seen the second floor.

The little boy who sits on the step by the pulpit because he has always sat there because he has asperger’s and this is his place and his way of being in the worship space and this little boy is told to move to make way for the baptism.

The Armed Forces personnel back from an overseas tour of duty in a war zone, who will only sit in the back pew where his back is against a wall for only does he feel he has 'control' of their anxiety, and yet who is chided by the minister to say come on up to the front – why do you people always sit at the back? Because we don't see the mental struggles.

What are you leaving at the door?

Who even has the right to claim that you are different in same way that makes you 'less than'? Do we have any business claiming that someone is different? 'So That all may be one' Jesus says. So that all may be one.

John 17:4 – “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”

Before the world existed. Before humanity showed up, before the earth was created, it was God. And it was Jesus. In the beginning, 'all were one'. How did we get into such disarray so quickly? Where is the way to finding ourselves to a place where 'all may be one'?

Where no one has to leave a part of them at the door,

so that when you come into worship, into this space,

you are able to relax, feel safe,

and be able to say with all of your soul,

'Here I Am'.

Thanks be to God. Amen.