

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, July 16, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Romans 12:3-15

Sermon: On Leadership

I want to begin my reflection today with a short video that was put together by one of my colleagues...

[A Worship Moment - Luke 9:57-58 - YouTube](#)

You might remember Aaron Mietchkota, who preached a great sermon and led a workshop for us a number of years ago as part of her work with the Iridesce project. This is Aaron's work. Aaron was recently ordained to UC ministry and is serving a rural pastoral charge in Prince Edward County.

Aaron imagined creating this video as a worship resource, she talked to the congregation about it, she got a couple of volunteers who were willing to record the scriptures, and she inspired others to capture some amazing video of the beautiful place where they live. She researched music that was available for public use, and still photos that represented the theme. Then she edited it all together to provide the church with this amazing moment of pause. For meditation, for reflection, and for renewal.

For me, all this is nothing short of amazing. When I finished theological college, I was still hand-writing my sermons. I didn't know how to film video or even take good still photos. I was lucky that I ran a youth group and knew how to put a VHS tape in a VCR to watch a movie – but I sure wasn't up to making one. For me, worship was the spoken word, traditional hymn-singing and not too much silence in the prayers (uncomfortable...)

But the world has changed a lot in 30 years. The pandemic forced even an old dog like me to update my tricks – with the help of Steve and my young adults, I found myself actually recording video from my phone or computer, editing them, even adding powerpoint slides or sound tracks.

Technologically speaking, though, I am still at a pretty basic level, a level that is pretty much taken for granted among my colleagues who are leaving college or being commissioned right now, and it has nothing to do with age!. It is just something that is now expected of church leaders, a certain comfort and knowledge about all the wild and wonderful ways that are available to send the good news out into the world. Its not all about Sunday morning in-person worship any more,

The impact of technology has dramatically changed the church. One of the challenges that has been named in our United Church of Canada's vision for the future is our shifting understanding of leadership. Not just the paid ministers, but the lay leaders and Sunday School teachers, the committee chairs and the volunteers, too.

It's not only skills with computers and cameras either. Like the meditative moments that Aaron and her congregation created (from technology) the real leadership is in finding an idea and holding a vision which creates something completely new, but which is still completely accessible to others. Only three minutes long, but it recognizes that for some people that is all the time they have to think about the things of the spirit.

It's so good though, that it invites them to come back to the resource, to meet the faith community and to stay longer.

If you think rural ministry is stuffy and traditional, I have to tell you Aaron has them doing creative craft projects, ukelele choir and even liturgical dance – all these are ways of tapping into the Spirit that is alive in their community of faith.

The United Church has outlined three characteristics by which it wants to be known: deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice. Those are becoming the attributes that the church is seeking when looking for new leaders. Instead of being specialists in faith formation, social action or prayer, the church is looking for people who are adaptive and creative, who are capable of pivoting from one to the other, and who are fed by a spirituality that keeps them resilient in tough times.

Questions are being raised whether the traditional training of our ministers and lay leaders is really supporting the vision. I have had a number of colleagues say: "If I really knew what ministry was going to be like, I would have gotten an MBA as well as my MDiv." Clergy and church councils find themselves dealing with property re-development and community engagement, advertising and marketing, branding and building websites as much as time spent on bible study and pastoral care.

The apostle Paul encountered many of those same issues in his years of ministry, not with technology mind you, but with developing new capacities. For example, at the time his letter to the Romans was written, the umbrella of Christian followers already encompassed a wide variety of faith perspectives. There were the originally Jewish Christians, and the originally pagan Christians – some were Asian or African in their ethnic background, others were European. Some were recognized as legitimate philosophers by the Roman empire, while others were considered rebels and scoundrels.

So Paul and other Christian leaders were called on to be negotiators and bridge builders, sometimes policing or sometimes supporting the new believers, always staying independent of Roman politics, but not so distinct that they seemed disrespectful. For Paul, who had been a teacher and a tent-maker, a scholar and a man of faith, this situation really stretched his gifts and skills in ways he never imagined.

And yet, for better or for worse, he was one of their leaders – he was the vision keeper, the peacemaker, the one who had the ability to see beyond an immediate argument, to imagine in its place what the church might become.

In an age when unity basically meant that everyone had to believe or do the same thing, Paul had a quite revolutionary thought: What if God actually created us to be different and to see differently and to believe differently... and what if that was okay. What if God gave us different talents and theologies, not so that we could crush one another in debates, but so that we could grow together? What if the leaders in the new faith believed this and then led accordingly?

All of these gifts are given us as grace. Aaron's creativity, my diligence in writing sermons, the colleague who forgot his sermon at home and had the huzpah to invite the congregation to meditate, just to simply be in silence for 10 minutes.

so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another

There's a lot of talk about collaborative ministry in the United Church right now. Sometimes it is brought about by practical concerns, like amalgamating congregations in order to afford ministry or to keep their doors open. Other times it is a creative solution when congregations realize they have a minister who can't be all things to all people (actually that's all of us.)

Some congregations are entering into collaborative ministries in order to cover many different aspects of church life. They recognize that the leaders they have, both lay and paid, just aren't equipped to do some of the specialized work that helps to build and renew congregations in the 21st century. Skills like branding and marketing, property development and event hosting, team management and goal setting.

Because, honestly, as a minister, that's not what we were trained for. We were trained to be stand alone lone ranger type ministers – that's why team ministry is harder than it looks! If we are going to work together with others, we need to be really clear about what our vision is, how we expect it to come about, and who is going to do what. We don't necessarily always have to agree, as Paul suggested, but we do need to love our God-given differences, and live in the Spirit we proclaim.

In the video, Aaron said that we have a heart that beats in rhythm with everything. But that doesn't make us all the same. Paul held the vision of a way we could all share in the rhythm of everything – but still be different – if we respect the leadership that all of us offer. If we empower those we work with and appreciate that working together may be hard at times, but it is surely the pathway to hope and God's kingdom.

Thanks be to God, for the gift and the challenge.