

Reflection June 8 – United Church 100th Anniversary

John 17:1,2,6, 17-23 (KJV)

Reflection One: A Look Back

I thought it would be a super idea to take the reading and reflection from the original UC Church formation service in 1925 and share some of that with you. And, I thought, I would offer some comment on the original reflection by Rev. Samuel P. Rose, keeping in mind the time in history his thoughts were offered. What a great idea I thought! I could then offer some comment on the same scripture, read of course by a more familiar biblical version in today's context.

Yes, what a brilliant idea I had! Alas, whilst reviewing the pages of the KJV and reading through what Rev. Rose shared back in 1925 I realized, perhaps that wasn't such a good idea after all.

Theoretically and Theologically a brilliant idea. Practically, well practically it seemed a dubious task.

Well, determination (or perhaps stubbornness) prevailed. I was not going to let the thous, thines, spakes and gavests intimidate me. After all the original author of this gospel had a singular message, didn't he? We should be able to understand what Rev. Rose was sharing 100 years ago. It is the same gospel, just a different point in time. And so, we jump in.

In context, the gospel message speaks of a time when Jesus was about to be betrayed and confronted by the Roman authorities. His message is to his disciples, likely during the last supper. He is prayerfully hopeful that they might continue to seek God as he has taught them and continue working toward the peaceful kingdom that has been his ministry. He speaks of his leaving, but of his coming again to be with them in that quest. Jesus is predicting his crucifixion and resurrection.

Rev. Rose begins his reflection (entire text available at the back of the sanctuary) by an affirmation of Jesus' walk to the cross. He suggests Jesus could have avoided it, could have removed himself from potential harm and hidden or just left. However, says Rose, had Jesus **"refused that last step, He could never have become the object of adoration He is to-day. Resisting recurring temptations to the short cut, our Lord pursued His way unfalteringly to the end, conscious that to save others He must not care to save Himself."**¹

The interpretation that Jesus gave up his life so that others might be saved has always troubled me. Worse is the suggestion that Jesus was crucified so that our sins might be forgiven. I just cannot believe that a God in our midst could possibly orchestrate such a thing. To me that is just bad theology. But I kept on with the text intent on trying to understand the reverend's message more deeply.

As I read further, I do applaud to Rev. Rose for making an excellent and insightful observation. He quotes an earlier chapter of John's gospel, Chapter 12, a story we all know well. From Verses 24-25, **"Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit. He that loveth his life loseth it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life."** Let us be daring enough to ask the question, If Jesus had refused the Cross, what would have followed?²

The grain of wheat that does not die perishes. The life governed by the maxim "safety first" is a lost life. He who is willing to accept salvation selfishly for himself alone has already become a castaway. You and I find ourselves as we seek not our own but the good of others. And this law is binding upon the Christian community as certainly as upon the individual believer. Only insofar as The United Church of Canada owes her birth to obedience to this law, only to that extent that she is loyal to it in the future, may she vindicate her right to live and grow. There is no prayer so fitting to this hour as the humble petition for pardon for whatever of vanity, or

¹ Check for web reference

² Same reference

self-love, or self-will has mingled with loftier motives in bringing us together as denominations into this new fellowship. There is no sacramental oath so appropriate as the promise by divine grace, as individuals and as a Church, to follow Christ all the way, for, believe me, thus and thus alone shall we find the way of life.³

The Rev. Rose had the privilege, but also the burden, of speaking to the formation of a new church. I can imagine him being filled with excitement as to the potential on the new entity. I can also imagine him being filled with great anxiety. He could pray for the new Union and bless its work into the future. He could remind it that union would be tough going and that there would be a need to put aside differences for the common good of those we were to serve. He could have reminded us to keep our eye on the ball; we are to serve God and walk with Christ. He could remind us to avoid getting stuck in our own specific doctrinal beliefs.

But he did something else. He said that the old way has died and that a new life had begun. This new life, a resurrected Church called the United Church had been borne. And in that he advised, as he concluded his homily, **the ideal type of institution for a religion like Christianity would be one which was entirely indifferent to its own fortunes, and prepared at any moment to die in order to live,”** he adds, **“so far as I am aware, no such type of Christian institution is at present to be found anywhere upon the earth,”..... What an ideal for the United Church of Canada to set before herself, willing as a grain of wheat to die, if thus she may enter into a larger life; ready to be “lifted up,” that she may draw men [sic],⁴], not to herself, but to the Christ,**

I think that was a brilliant message for everyone to hear 100 years ago. My question is how are we living that today?

John 17:1,2,6, 17-23 (NSRV Updated Edition) Reflection 2 A Look Ahead

Louise, Lenore and I took in our 2025 Regional Council Meeting last weekend in Nanaimo. The theme of the meeting was *“Cracked Open,”* which I found very appropriate for our United Church today.

Cracks in the very foundation of our societies are widening as basic care and compassion for neighbour seems to be diminishing. Intolerance for the “other,” however named, is on the rise. More and more fundamental human rights are being challenged and with that a rise in popularity of white supremacy movements. The drive by gang shootings and public displays of racism are commonplace now, even in our cities. A palpable unease rests heavily upon many hearts in this time. There are many cracks that need to be mended as much has been broken.

The United Church was inaugurated on June 10, 1925 in Toronto, Ontario, when the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, and 70 percent of The Presbyterian Church in Canada entered into a union. Also joining was the small General Council of Union Churches, centred largely in Western Canada. It was the first union of churches in the world to cross historical denominational lines and received international acclaim. Each of the founding churches had a long history in Canada prior to 1925.

The movement for church union began with the desire to coordinate ministry in the vast Canadian northwest and for collaboration in overseas missions. Congregations in Indigenous communities from each of the original denominations were an important factor in the effort toward church union.⁵ The amalgamation would make the United Church the largest Protestant Church in Canada.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ [History of The United Church of Canada | The United Church of Canada](#), accessed June 6, 2025

One can only imagine the enormous pressure on the founding churches prior to the union. The amalgamating denominations took substantial risks giving up a familiar path and a way of ministry to embrace something completely new. There were surely cracks in their structure and function before. What if everything went wrong? What if bickering over the authority of doctrine, disagreement on membership or irreconcilable differences in the Order of Ministers threatened to shatter the union? What then? The cracks would widen, and the new vision would die.

The truth is that, then, like now, the church had to be broken open. New seeds of ministry had to be scattered. Some would take root and thrive, others would perish. In time what was new and vibrant would also perish making room for something different again. That has been the way of those that follow a faith tradition for hundreds of years. Every denomination has had its challenges, and every denomination will continue to do so.

Our church membership continues to dwindle. (As it does in every mainline denomination in Canada). **The 2021 Canadian census found that 1.2 million Canadians (3.3% of the population) self-identified with the church, remaining the second-largest Christian denomination in Canada. That is down considerably from 2011 when there were about 2 million people. Church statistics for the end of 2023 showed 2,451 congregations and 325,315 members in 243,689 households under pastoral care, of whom 110,878 attend services regularly.⁶ In 2011 there were some 480,000 members and about 165,00 attending regularly.⁷**

Church closures and more and more common – In our region, five that I know of (Westbank, Rutland, St. Paul (Kelowna) and PLURA Hills and Mt. Paul in Kamloops. Sunday school classes are a distant memory in many Communities of Faiths as is the beloved United Church Women. Many of our Communities of Faith are struggling to meet budget shortfalls and have difficulty recruiting ministry personnel.

But on the brighter side, this United Church of ours is pivoting. In this region, the Pacific Mountain Regional Council, is trying its best to support all its Communities of Faith while at the same time embarking on new regional initiatives. A new “Strategic Ministry Support Fund” has been established to help congregations live out their ministry plans. New ministry initiatives or “Church Plants,” are being developed that offer new ways of “doing church.” There is a strong ministry support program called “LeaderSHIFT” to nurture ministry leaders. I have taken two retreats and participated in several on-line sessions which have been amazing. A strong and vibrant “First Third Ministry,” is thriving offering a variety of programs for youth and young adults. The PMRC remains steadfast in its commitment to equity, inclusion and justice. The PMRC gained Affirming Status in June 2022. Across Canada the United Church’s commitment to Indigenous Reconciliation is exemplary.

What I recall from this account is the Rev. Rose’s comments about the Church willing to die for its future. Repeating from part one, **“What an ideal for the United Church of Canada to set before herself, willing as a grain of wheat to die, if thus she may enter into a larger life; ready to be “lifted up,” that she may draw men [sic],⁸], not to herself, but to the Christ,”** I see the United Church dying again like it did in 1925 in order that a new thing be birthed.

A number of you have attended this or other United churches for years and have seen many, many changes. What will this Community of Faith look like in, 5, 10 or 15 years?

Jesus means to give his followers hope in John’s gospel we heard today. He is preparing them for his departure. The message is perhaps not really clear, even in the undated NRSV Shirley Mae shared, but there is not doubt what Jesus is saying. **“As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.”** God be in these your servants, shine your love in them and be with them always.

⁶ [united church of canada statistics - Search](#), accessed June 7, 2025

⁷ [united church membership over time - Search](#), accessed June 7, 2025

⁸ Ibid

“May they be one as we are one.” Let them become completely one with you, **“so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”**

Jesus gazed upwards as we might now and prayed. He prayed for a covenant promise, a prayer that God would look over and be with the people when Jesus left them. The disciples heard it and they believed. We have heard it all of our lives and we hear that promise today. All of those gathered for the 1925 Union heard it as well.

The United Church in its formation could not have envisioned where it would go or how it would get there but its members believed in a God of goodness and grace. A God of justice, hope and peace. We need to believe in that too regardless of what form of ministry this, or any church takes in the future. We need to believe and hold in our hearts a pastoral, healing, caring and compassionate God who desperately wants us to know love. That God is the Holy presence that was with Jesus, the Holy One who heard Jesus, prayer. That is the same Holy Presence that is with us now in this place and will be with us forever in this United Church of ours.

Unfortunately, we need to be broken open while we are on that journey, and brokenness is very hard. Some things have to die, like the way we used to do ministry and be the church. But we will always be cherished and always held in the Creator's arms regardless of where this journey leads.

Thanks for listening, Amen