



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Douglas Todd

Luke 4:1-13

February 21, 2010

First Sunday in Lent

## “Ten Reasons NOT to Join the United Church of Canada – But Why I’m Doing it Anyway”

I'd like to take a few moments to express some empathy for the Christian clergy of British Columbia -- for people like Bruce Sanguin who bravely stand up in their pulpits on Sundays.

Christian clergy have a tough job in the rugged Pacific Northwest, where the spiritual supermarket is remarkably open, and where loyalty to religious institutions is the weakest in all of North America.

B.C. and the rest of the Pacific Northwest, which includes Washington and Oregon, is officially the most “unchurched” region of North America.

In an individualistic culture like ours, which celebrates "choice," most people shop around for whatever spiritual belief suits them in the moment.

It's really hard to get a commitment out of them.

Or should I say, out of us. At least some of us.

In the challenging spiritual context of B.C., as I wrote about in my Cascadia book, clergy often have to be extremely gifted or charismatic to build even a small amount of loyalty to their spiritual "brand."

This corner of the continent has long been famous for leaving its Christian clergy defeated and broken. So, if you don't already do so, remember to say a few prayers for Bruce.

Where does this leave us, the people who have shown up today? In the midst of the confusing spiritual ferment that is B.C. – why did I join about 20 others at the front of this church two Sundays ago and re-affirm my baptism in the United Church of Canada?

With so many consumer choices out there, why this spiritual brand?

Well, as the evangelicals like to say, I'm here today to tell my story, to give my “testimonial.”

I hope it fits the beginning of Lent, which is a time for self-reflection. It is a time to try to listen to the Holy One about who we are called to be.

I can tell you upfront that it has been a long struggle to renew my commitment to the United Church. I probably have had more doubts than most. There have been many reasons I have avoided it for so long. And I'll get to them in a moment.

But, first, a little about my own theological biography.

I am a third generation Vancouverite. And in many ways I reflect the spiritual eclecticism of the region. I am a typical B.C. spiritual searcher, who doesn't want to be told what to do or believe.

I was raised in a seriously atheist family, which is fairly normal in Cascadia. I was taught that all religious people were kooks.

Of course, my family of origin was partly right. A lot of Christians are kooks. But I eventually found something lacking in the strongly atheistic home in which I grew up. It lacked a sense of hope.

I was lucky enough in my late teens to meet some Christians who were not kooks. They not only had hope, they had large hearts and sophisticated minds. When I attended the University of B.C., I hung around with them at what was then the Anglican-United campus chaplaincy.

Inspired by the United Church chaplain at the time, a free-thinking intellectual named Rev. George Hermanson, our student community became active on the UBC campus and I began studying something called process theology, which happens to be a lot like Bruce's "evolutionary Christianity."

There is a long version to this story of my early days of spiritual exploration, but the short version is I ended up being baptized at UBC at age 23 in the United Church of Canada.

I then traveled to Claremont School of Theology in southern California, where I studied with the great process

theologian, John Cobb. Some of you might remember John gave a sermon at Canadian Memorial in 2008. I loved studying theology, and considered entering the ministry, but, for various reasons, decided against it.

I went into journalism instead, and eventually began having a fascinating time writing at The Vancouver Sun about the wild world of spirituality, where thousands of beliefs constantly compete for attention, especially in B.C. However, it would be fair to say that, during my thirties and forties, my early baptismal experience lost some energy.

Even though I attended a United Church congregation from time to time, and kept up my reading in theology, for complex personal reasons my baptism became a little frozen.

I would say that over the decades I had developed, perhaps even subconsciously, quite a few reasons for not really re-committing to the United Church of Canada.

In fact, this is where I get to the title of this sermon:

"Ten Reasons NOT to join the United Church of Canada: But Why I Did it Anyway.

Here is my first reason not to join the United Church.

1. Why would anyone want to join an organization that's growing smaller?

The United Church of Canada has shrunk rapidly from the

denomination's heyday in the 1960s, when some dubbed it Canada's unofficial national church (outside of Quebec, that is). Even though almost one of 10 British Columbians continue to tell pollsters they identify with the United Church, less than two per cent of the population actually shows up regularly, other than for marriages and funerals.

Most of you probably can guess why I can overcome this problem of United Church downsizing. And that has in part to do with how Jesus himself would not have seen much significance in popularity. He was not into the numbers game. He was into the truth and authenticity game. Two thousand years ago that made Jesus an outsider. Again, today in British Columbia, being a follower of Jesus makes you part of a counter-culture.

This brings up my second reason not to join the United Church.

2. Why would anyone choose to stigmatize themselves?

My social status will not go up in B.C. when I tell people I have renewed my membership in the United Church. It is definitely not something my journalistic colleagues, for instance, will find enticing. That goes for a lot of my non-religious friends. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

Many British Columbians seem to think all Christians are just like Sarah Palin or George W. Bush or Pope Benedict XVI. The vast majority of Canadians do not realize there is such

a thing as liberal, or progressive, or evolutionary Christianity. Still, despite the religious illiteracy of the public, the United Church continues to stand for many beliefs and values I find significant.

3. Okay. Now I'll move onto two more of my rationales for not committing earlier to the United Church, reasons you might find trivial. Still, they have bugged me.

My third reason not to join is that I think too many United Church leaders have poor taste in the visual arts. Admit it. Many church halls are dowdy, filled with bad donated art that no one has the courage to take down. Last fall I became quite attuned to this problem when I was up at the United Church's otherwise wonderful Naramata Centre. I was confronted with a black velvet painting of a sunset. It was so visually disturbing that the small group I was with had to turn the face of the black velvet painting against the wall.

Now, even though this might seem like cultural snobbery to some, I think there is a connection between beauty and the sacred. And I'm relieved to report many people at Canadian Memorial, as well as other congregations, agree with me. They have a sense of esthetics. For instance, in its traditional way, this sanctuary is beautiful. And, when it comes to interior design, the Centre for Peace is also gratifying. Maybe the United Church is getting over its black velvet days.

4. Don't laugh at this next one, but my fourth reason to stay away from the United Church has to do with my personal battle with food.

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to get exercise most days and often tough to say no to sweet and high-fat foods. But such foods, at least in the past, have seemed to be customary at United Church meetings, where people talk a great deal and no time is set aside for fitness. I'm pleased, however, I am led less into temptation at Canadian Memorial, where generous volunteers tend to serve healthy food. As well, many at Canadian Memorial have in recent months been actively developing what could be called a "spirituality of food," to fit into Ken Wilber's integral model. I also find it reassuring that Bruce and many people here are into yoga and other forms of fitness, including cycling. They're following the New Testament admonition to treat the body as a temple.

5. What's been my fifth reason not to join the United Church? I have trouble with some old hymns.

Being raised an atheist, I grew up with B.B. King, Miles Davis, Van Morrison and Bruce Cockburn. Maybe that's one of the reasons I grind my teeth at some of the triumphalistic and militaristic lyrics that shout out from some of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Christian hymns. Even though some of those hymns are musically stirring – including today's A Mighty Fortress is Our God or Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above – I worry they send a misleading message

to newcomers about the kind of spirit we actually believe in the United Church.

That said, I have nothing but praise for many United Church music directors, especially Neil Weisensel. Neil and gang mix things up in a highly creative way. In fact, Neil and company are helping me better appreciate classical and choral music. In addition, I love the contemporary gospel we hear from Brian Tate. And my gratitude goes out to Susan Cowan for organizing Taize chanting at Canadian Memorial. There have been many times, listening to the choir and musicians, where I have choked up, where my breath has been taken away by the soulfulness of the music. I'm sure the same is true for you.

6. My sixth hesitation about the United Church has had to do with "political correctness."

Being a good "liberal" church, there are certain things it seems you're not supposed to think or say in the United Church for fear of offending someone. Those things usually have to do with gender, sexual orientation, immigration and so-called visible minorities. After all, many United Church people are "nice" people. They don't want to hurt feelings. I'm like that. And I'm a dyed-in-the-wool liberal too. Still, I sometimes wish United Church people could be more self-critical, and more frank about the flaws in liberal ideologies.

That said, most of my friends are either gays, lesbians, feminists, political activists, ecological warriors, artistic

radicals, intellectual adventurers or members of one ethnic group or another. I can't imagine for a second belonging to a community where such people aren't integral to its life.

7. My seventh reason to be nervous about the United Church relates to its organization, or lack thereof.

The United Church of Canada, as Bruce writes in his book, *The Emerging Church*, is a "green" organization. That is, the United Church of Canada is democratic – probably to a fault. It has a horizontal structure, which emphasizes that everyone is equal. While that is admirable at one level, it can lead to thinking one person's idea is as good as another's, a form of intellectual relativism. I often wish the United Church of Canada could balance its commitment to organizational flatness with openness to a natural vertical structure, which could help it strengthen and grow.

That said, I recognize every church is somewhat disorganized. For that matter, every secular institution is disorganized, ultimately dysfunctional. Sometimes it seems it's just a matter of choosing your dysfunction. I wouldn't want to live under the authoritarianism of some Christian denominations. Like a true British Columbian, I am not a fan of being told what to believe. In other words, the United Church might lack an effective structure, but, as the title of one of favorite children's book says, "It could be worse." In addition, I happen to believe Canadian Memorial is well run. There is a healthy feel to this congregation's life.

8. What's been my eighth reason – or maybe you'll be thinking "excuse" -- not to re-join the United Church all these years? It is that it hasn't, in the past, offered enough spiritual practices.

There are an awful lot of words coming from the front of most United churches. To be honest, I would not want to add up how many words are uttered during a typical 65-minute Protestant service, if you include all the prayers, the Bible readings, the children's time, the hymn lyrics, the announcements and the sermon. To me many Protestant liturgies, unlike in some other traditions, don't include enough contemplation. Not enough time for meditation, silent prayer, physical movement or chanting. But things are changing in the United Church, especially at Canadian Memorial. All those spiritual practices I just mentioned and more – including labyrinth walking and centering prayer – are becoming central to many United Church congregations.

9. My ninth excuse for being slow to rejoin the United Church, or even re-embrace mainline Protestantism, has to do with its lack of recognizable leaders, or cultural heroes; people we can point to to outsiders and say, "That famous person is one of us."

Love them or not, the United Church has no Dalai Lama, no Thich Nhat Hanh, no Pope, no Archbishop of Canterbury, no Rick Warren, no Deepak Chopra, no Eckhart Tolle.

Despite that, I have come to recognize lately just how large a “community of saints” I have discovered over the decades within the United Church of Canada and other mainline Christian denominations. These people have inspired me ever since my twenties. They include many United Church clergy, like Rev. George Hermanson, Rev. Bob Smith, Rev. Ron Atkinson, Rev. Gary Paterson, Prof. Terry Anderson and Prof. Chuck Anderson, and of course Bruce and Susan Dumoulin. The list could go on. As well, there are many more mainline Protestants and even Catholics who have overwhelmed me with their commitment to truth, and justice. They include Christian theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr (who happens to be President Barack Obama’s favorite), as well as John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, Jay McDaniels, Sallie McFague, Charles Taylor, Charles Birch and a host of others. When it comes to intellectual integrity, I have rarely found their match. I am proud to belong to the same tradition as them.

10. Finally, what has been my 10<sup>th</sup> reason not to join the United Church? It is the one I began with. With so many options out in the spiritual supermarket, and some of them even pretty tasty, how can anybody settle on just one tradition?

Well, there comes a time when we have to go beyond just superficially sampling from the smorgasbord. Even in individualistic B.C., it’s beneficial to actually join a community. Any spiritual teacher that I respect ends up saying that we truly challenge ourselves

only after we commit to a specific tradition. That doesn’t mean blindly accepting everything it offers, nor stopping learning from other paths.

But it does mean that, rather than casually sampling a little bit of this and that, it’s worthwhile to explore the particularities of one path. And I can do so with an open mind, because the United Church, and especially Canadian Memorial, are committed to self-reform. They are truly welcoming of creative transformation, which to me is the essence of the Christian way.

So, that’s a long list of reasons not to get involved. But even with these 10 imperfections, I have come to the conclusion the battle-scarred United Church of Canada and spirit-filled Canadian Memorial United Church congregation are institutions well worth celebrating.

Since this is Lent, a time for self-reflection, I’ll end with a transforming experience that occurred during days of intense contemplation last year.

I was at Naramata in November for its annual 8-day silent retreat. It was a profound experience. You might say it was my more modest version of Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, which we heard about today during the gospel reading.

The New Testament says Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the allure of power and fame. Those worldly enticements almost made him give up his ministry. Now, we all have our psychological temptations, our reasons

not to give ourselves more fully to the Holy, and mine also arose during that retreat.

Many personally challenging and life-changing things happened during the sacred inner work of those eight days, in which each of us worked with a spiritual director. One of the things I can tell you about occurred after evening Vespers, on the third night.

It involved walking through the Naramata labyrinth in the dark, under the stars. Before we entered the labyrinth, the spiritual directors had asked us what things from our life, what questionable habits, we wanted to “leave behind.” We were given a rock and asked to associate that thing we wanted to leave behind with the rock. I said I wanted to leave behind “extreme doubt.”

After everyone else finished naming the thing they wanted to “leave behind” from their lives, we took our metaphorical rocks, walked the labyrinth and left them at the centre of it in the dark. The service soon ended. And that evening I felt very vulnerable. I no longer had my lifelong companion -- my old friend, “Extreme Doubt.”

And I think, because of that, I ended up that night having what many might call a mystical experience.

I won't explain the details, in part because they might seem odd, and certainly they might seem a little surreal, as Susan McCaslin, Canadian Memorial's resident mystic expert would understand.

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But the experience of leaving behind “extreme doubt,” combined with my recent involvement at Canadian Memorial, and my connection of more than 30 years with mainline Protestantism, helped me conclude that I am grateful to this vflawed institution known as the United Church of Canada. It has been with me all along on my journey.

Despite the United Church's struggles, despite its often-poor aesthetics and outsider status, despite its declining numbers and lack of organization, and despite its questionable old hymns, the time has finally come to admit the United Church has been and is a home for me.

I hope it may be for you.

So be it.