

Words Are Important

July 30,2023

May the words I offer this morning and the reflections of all our hearts be faithful to your way O God.

One Sunday morning after church I had a conversation with some friends. It was a friendly chat about a hymn a hymn that we sang that morning. One friend was concerned. He was concerned because he felt the hymn gave a nod to colonialism.

He got stuck on the words “go out into the world to do God’s work” he thought when we sang those words, go out into the world to do God’s work he thought it harkened back to the days when churches sent out missionaries to convert the people of other countries, back to the days of countries overtaking whole civilizations and imposing their politics, economics, culture and ideals on the subjected people. Colonialism.

In the past several years, we have learned a lot about the colonization of Indigenous people and so his concerns were very real. Reconciliation Calls to Action ask us to pay attention to these kinds of details.

Others in the discussion thought that the hymn asked us to go out into the world to bring kindness and love to others just like Jesus taught us to do. It was a good discussion.

Words; words are important and this conversation reminded me to pay attention to the words of our worship; the scripture, message, prayers and hymns. What are the images that are formed by the words of worship? How have those images and words changed over the years? How have those changes reflected our ever growing and changing relationship with God? So many questions? Worship comes to us as a whole package; scripture, prayers, sermons and music. For most us it is difficult to imagine one aspect without the others. I wonder What part of the service feeds your soul? For me it is the music. I especially love the music of a Sunday morning. The hymns and anthems rouse a spirit in me that affects my whole body. Sometime joy, sometimes melancholy sometimes wonder. The psalmist says:
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth
Worship the Lord with gladness
Come into his presence with singing

Music is an integral and important aspect of our spiritual journey. I think back to the days when we were in the “**coming out of the pandemic**” mode and we were not allowed to sing on a Sunday morning. It seemed incomprehensible that we could worship without singing. I am so glad we are back to raising our voices in joy and praise.

In the introduction to the Voices United hymnbook it says.

“Hymns have always had a central part in the making of Christians. For many next to scripture a hymn book is the church’s most important sourcebook. It is from hymns that many learn and retain scripture stories. It is from hymns that many receive their primary and most enduring theological education. Hymns stay with us long after occasions of teaching and preaching fade from memory.”

It is from hymns that many receive their primary and most enduring theological education. The power of the hymn is great;

I have on many occasions led a worship service with people living with memory loss and it is the hymns that brings a light to their eye
and the words come from deep within as they join in the singing of the favourite hymns from their past. Such an amazing joy!

If it is from hymns that many of us receive our primary and most enduring theological education - the spiritual connection to our faith, then I thought it might be fun to explore the changes in our hymns. I thought we could look at our hymns to help us examine the changing theology of our times. Kind of a fun summer thing to do.

In the 50s and 60s Just about every UC began every morning worship with the hymn Holy Holy Holy. Just like we did this morning. When you were singing this hymn this morning I wonder what memories (if any) came to you?

For me it conjures up church in my childhood and teen years and there is certain comfort in that.

The familiarity brings memories of family of Grandparents and friends and a time with few worries.

Familiar repetition that is reassuring. A nostalgic remembering.

Do the words of this hymn speak to us today? For some of us the words have little meaning because it speaks of a mighty God with power over all the people and nature and even the gargoyles and it reminds us of the image of God as a puppeteer manipulating the world and our life.

As I pay attention to these words, there is much that does not mesh with my present relationship with God.

I wonder what young people think about when singing of a Lord God Almighty.

Words are so important

“Holy Holy Holy” and Amazing Grace are hymns that grew out of the **1800s** where people saw Jesus as the source and object of love and as capable of transforming the world and where people were invited to respond and to transform their lives in response to what God has done in Jesus. Pointing us to the resurrection.

Then we began to sing of Jesus Christ calling us as disciples. Songs with a focus on the Saving power of Jesus.

About the time that McClure Church was forming as a community of faith in the mid 60s, there were many new things being introduced into worship across most mainline churches. The church was shifting just as society was shifting.

It was the beginning of inclusive language and the broadening of our liturgy.
The Revised Standard version of the Bible was published;
the church seasons were being marked,
the common lectionary started to be used.
The WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD curriculum helped to bring greater use of lay leadership
and more children participation in worship
The church began to see that we needed to change the words to match our changing
understanding of our relationship with God.

Jesus loves me is a perfect example ... The 1859 version found in the United Church
Hymnary of old says

*Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong we are weak and he is strong.*

We are weak. God is strong.

It talks about Jesus washing away our sin and God from his shining throne on high
watching over us and taking us to heaven when we die. These words hardly seem like a
comforting encouraging teaching children's song for today's child. This is the version that
many of us grew up with and is still used at some church camps and in care homes.

Today we sang a changed version recognizing the scripture lesson of Jesus telling the
disciples to let the children come to him. We sang of a Jesus who is like a friend walking
with us as we navigate our way through life... we sang of a Jesus who because of his love
for us makes us strong. Jesus Loves Me is a demonstration of growth, and compromise
We retain the favourite comforting tune... the music but we bring the words into the
present era.

With these changed words we experience the beginning of a time where we begin to see
Christ as present in the midst of our human condition. Present among us.

A reminder that words are important

Gradually our world expanded to be more inclusive to include believers from around the
world.

It broadens to include concern for all humanity. We sang "In Christ there is no East or
West. In him no south or north but one great family of love throughout the whole wide
earth".

And new images emerge with the widespread acceptance of African – American hymns
like Go tell it on the Mountain and Let us Break Bread together and Lord of the
Dance is another one. Is another one.

We had an explosion of hymns with a growing acceptance of fresh images and rhythms
coming from around the Globe.

I remember that we were so excited about the Green book... SONGS FOR A GOSPEL
PEOPLE. Walter Farquharson, a former moderator of the United Church and Linnea
Good and Ron Klusmeier and Fred Kaan and oh so many more great contemporary
musicians began to write the songs of our faith in a language we could understand and
music that was upbeat, hope-filled songs that called us to action

We got VOICES UNITED in 1996 with hymns like "What Does the Lord Require of you."
Justice, kindness walk humbly with your God.

And

"May the God of Hope Go with you."

And then we began to sing about the change in our images of God
Images that recognized a God that is around and within all of creation... including you and me.

O Beautiful Gaia 41 found in our newest hymn book MORE VOICES is an example of recognizing that God's spirit comes to us in nature. It sings of soil yielding its harvest, waves crashing on granite, pine bending in windstorm and loon nesting in marshland.

And lovely action songs reminding us that God is all around and within us.
Like a Rock Like a Rock God is under our feet
Like a starry night sky God is over our head
Like the sun on the horizon God is ever before
Like the river runs to ocean our home is in God evermore.

Mostly these changes crept up on us in a gradual manner. Our practises have changed and we are doing our best to work with all the changes and hoping to be welcoming to new people in this space that we created as a community of faith wanting to reach out to the world.

Music does indeed help form our foundations of faith; as we sing of God's presence in our world, providing lessons for living that follow the way of Jesus. As we wrestle with the changes in our understanding of our relationship with God and with Jesus, we remember what we proclaim **to be the heart of our tradition.** LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

Our final hymn today Draw the Circle Wide.. helps to define our faith
And as we pay attention to the words, we can see that God is now in the center of our lives and we are asked to reach out not to dominate our world but to reach out so that our loving knows no borders and that all doors are open for all people.

May it be so.

Rev. Sheila Krueger