

## **June 7, 2015 – Crazy for God – 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The UCC**

### **Mark 3: 20-35**

Jesus' ministry was just beginning, and it was going well. He was becoming known as a healer and a storyteller. In particular, people were impressed by the fact that Jesus was able to heal those who were mentally ill – those who seemed to be possessed by unclean spirits or demons. Large crowds of people were following him wherever he went – sometimes they were so closely packed that there wasn't even room to eat the lunches they had brought.

Jesus' ministry was going so well that he was starting to get noticed by Jewish religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. They were noticing that Jesus wasn't one to follow their rules: he would share meals with tax collectors and sinners, eat when Jewish people were supposed to be fasting and he even allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath.

One day, while Jesus was home in Galilee, a crowd surrounded him yet again. His family heard he was there and they came because they were worried about him. They had heard people were talking about Jesus and saying he was crazy, that "he had gone out of his mind." At the same time, religious leaders from Jerusalem arrived and said Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul (Satan). They said Jesus was able to perform exorcisms, to remove unclean spirits, because he had an evil spirit within him.

Have you ever had someone say, "You're crazy! You've lost your mind?" Was it

because you were saying something they didn't want to hear or maybe doing something that didn't make sense to them? Were you breaking or stretching the rules? Were you questioning ideas or systems that had existed for years?

I know some of the people I worked with at IBM thought I was crazy when I decided to leave my job to go into pastoral ministry. I know that there were people here at First United in the 1980's who thought it was crazy to tear down the manse and build the centre part of this building. I know that even Rachel Notley's brother thought she was crazy when he realized she had only prepared one speech for election night. Sometimes it's hard for people to believe in what seems impossible or to accept change that goes against the norm.

Jesus said to the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" He questioned if it was possible for an evil spirit to cast out another evil spirit, for evil to be divided against itself. He used metaphors or parables to explain that his power came not from evil spirits but from the Holy Spirit, from God. Jesus even suggests that by calling the Spirit within him Beelzebub, the scribes were committing an eternal or unforgivable sin.

Jesus wasn't even willing to listen to his mother and his brothers and sisters. Even though they had come out of love and caring to try and convince him to stop, he wasn't willing to go to the outside edge of the crowd and talk to them. Instead he looked at his disciples, those were closest to him in the crowd, and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my

brother and sister and mother.” Jesus knew he was following the will of God. He wasn’t worried about looking a little crazy.

It’s makes me wonder if we all need to be a little bit crazy to call ourselves Christians. In the increasingly secular world in which we belong, we are going against the norm just by being part of a religious organization, just by showing up here on Sunday morning.

Today we are celebrating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The United Church of Canada. What a perfect opportunity to honour ways in which the United Church has proven to be just a little bit crazy. The most recent Mandate magazine talks about prophetic moments in the history of our church. These moments were prophetic because we challenged the status quo, we allowed ourselves to be moved by the Spirit and therefore to some we probably looked a little crazy.

Can you name some of those moments?

1. Saskatchewan conference ordaining Lydia Gruchy in 1936. First woman to be ordained.
2. Ordination of gay and lesbians in 1988
3. Apology to First Nations people – 1986 & 1998
4. Working with other faiths and cultures to promote peace

We haven’t always been willing to go against the norm. The Mandate also contains the story of a missionary named James Endicott. Through his work in China, Endicott witnessed the corruption and brutality of the Chinese National

Party and in the mid-1940's he urged the church and the Canadian government to condemn their rule. Both Canadian media and the United Church lashed back. They didn't call him crazy, but they did call him a communist and labelled him "public enemy number one." It took until 1982 for the church to offer James Endicott a formal apology.

Of course one of the craziest things we ever did was the creation of this United Church of ours. Can you imagine the work and the negotiations and compromises that had to place in order for The Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church and the Congregational Union to join together?

Just recently I've been working with a pastoral charge who have recognized that they can no longer support a full-time minister. We talked about the possibility of amalgamation with nearby pastoral charges; but for now they chosen to look for a part-time minister instead. They weren't ready to face the challenge of joining with another pastoral charge. And yet these three denominations were willing to let go of three individual identities and take the crazy leap toward unity.

As we celebrate 90 years of being The United Church of Canada, it's also important to note that the church is facing major changes. In response to a decline in membership and financial resources, General Council established a Comprehensive Review Task Group to look at the overall structure of our denomination. The recommendations of that task group will be voted on at 42<sup>nd</sup> General Council that is taking place in Corner Brook, Newfoundland this August.

Their report has been available for a few months and every Presbytery and Conference has had the opportunity to review it and to put forward proposals to change or further clarify their recommendations.

In brief, the report suggests that we need to reduce the number of levels of governance from four to three. Instead of General Council, Conferences, Presbyteries and pastoral charges, we would have National Council, Regional Councils and Communities of Faith. This would reduce the financial costs and also reduce the number of volunteer hours required to do the administrative work of the church. The task group has described in broad terms how this would work, but there are many questions that are still unanswered. To many people in our denomination these changes seem crazy, others see them as our only way to survive.

I have the privilege of being elected as one of Saskatchewan Conference's commissioners to the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Council in Corner Brook and as I prepare for that task I know that my biggest job will be to keep my mind and my heart open to the movement of Spirit in myself and in others. Many wonderfully crazy decisions have been made at General Councils throughout the decades and I believe this General Council will be one of historic importance for the life and work of The United Church of Canada. Let's pray that we will all have the courage to follow the Spirit and be crazy for God.