

# “Roots and Wings”

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Acts 10: 1-29

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Do you remember the old joke that goes ‘How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb? Only one — but it has to *want* to change!’ How many people does it take to change a church? What does it take for a church to change?

Churches with any history don’t change quickly or easily. I remember Pastor Nicky Gumbel talking about a minister who wanted to move the piano from one side of the sanctuary to the other and knew his congregation would never approve of such a drastic change, so he moved the piano a few inches every Sunday until finally it was where he wanted it to be.

Today’s scripture reading is about a time when the church changed significantly. It wasn’t a physical change to a building — it was a change in a fundamental belief. It changed their understanding of God and it changed their understanding of who they were called to be as the church.

The issue was whether they should be reaching out to Gentiles (anyone who is not a Jew) or only focusing on Jews to talk about the good news of Jesus. This became a divisive issue and a major controversy in the early church. You have to remember that Jesus was a Jew, the disciples were Jews, and they believed that the Jewish people were God’s chosen people and that God was sending the Messiah — the Chosen One — to the Jews. Seeing someone who was not a Jew as being on equal footing with a Jew, and extending the same privileges was radical and no small shift! But somehow Peter changed his mind. Somehow Peter had a change of heart. And eventually, so did the Church.

The church has made many significant changes over the last 2,000 some odd years. Some are smaller and some are seen through the lens of history as far more significant.

One of the ways that the world-wide church has almost universally changed is in its understanding of slavery and where people of colour fit into the church. Slavery is very much present and even condoned in the Bible. The apostle Paul in several places urges slaves to obey their masters, like in Colossians 3:22: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord”. For hundreds of years these passages in the Bible were used to condone things like Colonialism, slavery and

segregation or apartheid. Today, apart from I'm sure some really nutty off-the-charts fundamentalist churches, you'd have a hard time finding a denomination that supports slavery. The church has changed. It changed its understanding of God and it changed its understanding of how to be the church.

I was talking with a woman I know who has major issues with Canada bringing in refugees and with Muslims in general, and she knows where I stand on the issue. But when I brought up how we've changed on segregation, her reply was simply "Oh well, we're over that." As if to say, that's a non-issue.

But it wasn't a non-issue for a long time. Not so long ago — within living memory of most of us — there was state-sanctioned segregation in the U.S. And of course it wasn't just state-sanctioned: it was faith-sanctioned. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said that Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. Did you know that the Civil rights movement didn't just have sit-ins — they also had "kneel—ins"? On Sunday mornings throughout the South, black and white college students would convene in front of all-white churches and kneel, asking merely for the opportunity to come inside and worship together with the family of God.

It's easy to say that it's not an issue today. Clearly racism remains a big issue in the U.S. and in Canada. Just a month ago an Indigenous woman was killed when someone threw a trailer hitch out the window of their truck yelling "I got one!" Culturally and legally things have changed; but when it comes to individual hearts, racism is alive and well.

Yesterday was the Brockville Pride Parade. As a denomination, the United Church of Canada has been officially supporting and celebrating the LGBTQ2 community for 29 years. It was a hugely controversial and divisive issue in the United Church and many members, some ministers and some congregations left the United Church over it.

It was about 20 years later that this congregation, Wall Street, decided to formally work through the issue (somewhere around 2009-2010) of faith and homosexuality. I remember it was early-ish in my time here and Pastor Doug Warren led us through an in-depth study and conversation around the topic of homosexuality and the Bible and our faith. Out of that study came the decision to marry same-sex couples and to be an inclusive congregation.

The question I have is, how do we as a church, as followers of Jesus, handle these kinds of change? How do you know when to reach your neck out and take an unpopular stand and when to stand firm and say 'that's not who we are?'

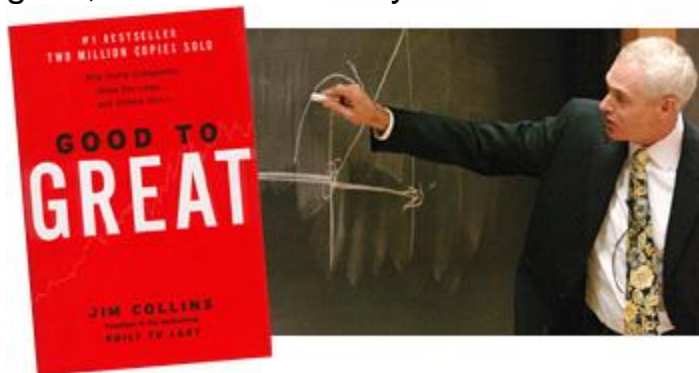
Sue Hutton reminded me, when she was leading a devotion for a Conference meeting, of a turn of phrase that was very popular in the 90's —'Roots and Wings'.

It seems to me that churches, like people, need both roots and wings.

The danger is when you have way more of one than the other.

So many Christians and churches, even in the United Church, don't seem to have roots. They are happy to follow any new trend and sort of just go where the wind blows. That may be fine when everything is lovely and calm but as soon as difficulties arise there is nothing to hold you and keep you grounded. It reminds me of the chameleon on the Looney Tunes clip of the chameleon. Check it out: <https://youtu.be/odSUinbD2Dw> The chameleon is happy as a lark changing from this colour to that colour but has a nervous breakdown when he tries to be everything.

On the other hand, many people and many churches, even in the United Church, don't seem to have any wings. They are rooted in the past and in the traditions of the church. Many are rooted in faith, in the Bible and their beliefs but are afraid of anything that smells like change. I think often it is the conflict, the controversy and the risk that they are afraid of. They just want the church to be a nice, safe and friendly place. But neither you nor the church can survive if you don't change. If you don't change you can't grow, and that inevitably means death.



Jim Collins wrote a bunch of great books that analyze companies — why some thrive and some don't. He says that organizations that do well particularly in challenging times do two things:

1. They preserve the core and
2. They stimulate progress.

Preserving the core is about understanding the heart of who you are and what should not change. What are the core values of your organization, your church that you hold firm to? Stimulating progress is about giving employees and volunteers the freedom to risk and to experiment and try new things. It was Jim Collins who talked about how important it is to welcome BHAGS (Big Harry's Audacious Goals).

Our sanctuary banners perfectly show this balance to which we are called: De Profundus, Extra Muros. Out of the depths of our faith (roots)

and beyond the walls (wings). We are called to dig into our faith, and with that firm foundation we are called to reach out and to risk.

The church was never meant to be a safe place. Look at Jesus. He knew exactly who he was and what he was called to do, and with that firm foothold he was not afraid of controversy. He was not beholden to anyone: the religious leaders or the crowds or the court of public opinion or even his family. He wasn't afraid that people would talk about him or oppose him. Heck, he knew his mission would lead to opposition and even to death, and he walked towards it. Because he was so rooted in his mission he could with confidence ask for water from a Samaritan woman, or touch a leper, or eat with a Tax Collector and call him to follow.

How do we know when to change and when to stand firm against the winds of change? For me the answer is to look to Jesus. As a church we are called to move and to change and to risk, but we need an anchor. Not so long ago sailors used the stars to navigate. Part of the reason it worked was because they could count on the North Star not moving.



They could figure out where they were in relation to the North Star—it was ever present, telling them where they were and where to go. That unmoving North Star allowed them to move—allowed them to cross oceans and venture to places they had never been before.

Jesus is our North Star. We read the whole of scripture with the 3-D glasses of Jesus on, and it brings the rest of it alive.

As an individual, I sometimes feel tossed around in the wind and waves and I hear this group of people saying we should be like this and another saying we should be like that. I'm a recovering people pleaser, so it's easy to get swept up with this idea or that idea. I have learned to take these dilemmas to my prayer time and to anchor myself in Christ through scripture and prayer and devotion. This doesn't mean I get it all perfectly, I don't. God does not change, but my understanding of God grows and changes. My understanding of God's heart for certain issues changes, but I feel settled and at peace instead of tossed about.

One of my favourite quotes is by Corrie Ten Boom who said that we are called to have "hard feet and a soft heart." The trouble with many people and many churches is that they have the opposite, they have soft feet — feet afraid of stepping here or there, and hard hearts — hearts

unmoved by the injustices and hurts of the world. Jesus was the ultimate one with hard feet and a huge loving and soft heart.

There is of course a risk. There is always a risk. How do we know we are following God's will 100%? We don't. We believe in core values of love, of grace, that every human being is made in the image of God and loved by God. Our faith and our understanding is far from perfect. We need to be open and humble in our beliefs. On this side of perfect, I am convinced that the only fail-safe path is the path of love and justice that permeates the Bible.

Yesterday, many in the church walked in the Pride Parade. How much of a difference does it make? Who knows? Though it's not quite as risky and bold as it was 7 years ago, it is still important. It is still important to send the message that Jesus loves you to many who know so little love.

I had a couple of conversations that convinced me that we need to keep doing this, that the church needs to keep showing up. One of the them was with a teen who was walking to the starting point of the parade. I was with my youngest, Maisie, and Maisie was enamoured with the teen's rainbow cape and colourful face paint. We started chatting and walking together from there. I asked if she'd been to many of the Pride Parades and she said her parents wouldn't let her go last year because they are homophobic (those were her words). This year, she said, her parents were away and couldn't stop her.

Now this was a brief conversation, I don't know her situation. I didn't ask if she was a lesbian or what, but I couldn't help but think that if she is a lesbian, her parents forbidding her from going to a Gay Pride Parade was not going to change this young woman one iota — all it was going to do was drive a wedge between her and her parents.

I couldn't help but think the Church has been the same way. The church has had an unchanging message that homosexuality is a sin and that hasn't changed the fact many people are homosexual or transgendered — all it has done is drive a wedge between that community and the Church. That is bad enough, but the Church for most is the gateway to God. That to me is a sin worse than anything. We are called to remove stumbling blocks to God, not to create them. As our United Church Creed states, it is Jesus who knows us and loves us who is "our judge and our hope". My job, the job of the church is to bring people to the overwhelming love of Jesus. I was wearing my clerical collar so she guessed we were from a church. I told her we'd been walking in the parade from the beginning because we believe that God loves ALL and not just some. Will it make a difference? Who knows? But I'd like to think that a small pebble was swept out from the

path between her and the One who created her and loves her and has a purpose for her life.

I don't know where in the future we will be called to step out and take a risk for the sake of bringing the transforming love of Jesus to people who need to feel it, but rooted in the gospel of Jesus we will continue to sail into uncharted territory.

Thanks be to God.