

## *Communities of Hope*

David Wilson

Guest Preacher: Editor/Publisher of *The Observer*

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – Anniversary Sunday

November 6, 2011

---

**Text:** 2 Corinthians 6:3-10

We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

---

Well it seems like Rev. Harold Camping might have finally thrown in the towel. You probably recognize the name. He's the 90-year-old California pastor who's been predicting the end of the world for the last 20 years. The first time was in 1988 – and he got it wrong. The next was in 1994. Wrong again. More recently, he claimed he had biblical proof that on May 21<sup>st</sup> this past spring Jesus would return to Earth, the righteous would fly up to heaven, and that there would follow five months of fire, brimstone and plagues, with millions of people dying each day. Wrong again. I was delighted it didn't happen, because it turned out to be a really nice summer. Undeterred, a somewhat more circumspect Camping then announced the end would *probably* begin on October 21. Well, we're still here.

As I say, I'm delighted that the world isn't ending – that nice summer has morphed into a really nice autumn. But I am less than delighted by the sneering saturation coverage Harold Camping got in the mass media. I don't know about you, but I

cringed when I heard Camping and his followers described as “devout Christians”. It was almost as if the media welcomed this particular nonsense as validation of their general bias against Christianity. They seem to think this was another well-deserved nail in the coffin of the Christian faith.

Mercifully, we’ve probably heard the last of Harold Camping. He can always shrink back into the shadows and think of ways to spend the \$80 million his followers have donated to him in the last five years.

In the meantime, we have the ongoing spectacle of the Republican presidential nomination race south of the border. The candidates are falling over themselves trying to be more devout than each other. Typically, the more “devout” the candidate, the more outrageous the beliefs. Texas Governor Rick Perry’s shift from Methodism to an evangelical church in suburban Austin likely had more to do with his political ambitions than the hunger of his soul. Now Perry’s campaign people accuse the Democratic Party of being controlled by the forces of Satan. Herman Cain of Georgia gets into hot water over allegations of sexual harassment and backroom payoffs, and rather than face reporters’ questions launches into an impromptu performance of Amazing Grace. Michelle Bachmann of Minnesota may be the most “devout” of the lot. Her theology ranges from a belief in creationism to a view that being gay is some kind of enslavement. She does not even belong on late-night cable, let alone the Oval Office. And that’s before we even factor in her husband, Marcus, who’s also one of her campaign executives. The guy actually makes it a point of honour to assert that he’s a professional, Christian, homosexual de-programmer, as if “deprogramming” gay people were as natural as helping someone change their hair colour or try on a new pair of shoes.

If you believe the Tea Partiers and the late-night televangelists and the extreme right-wing of the Republican Party, these are great days for Christians, the culmination of 25 years of grassroots organizing that began with the likes of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition. I beg to differ, I think these are really difficult days for Christianity. These are days when more and more, Christianity is being cheapened by those who exploit it for political and personal gain . . . when reasonable, intelligent, *thinking* Christians — which is to say pretty much all of us here today — are being marginalized by tabloid Christianity and a tsunami of secularism that allows it to thrive.

Do not underestimate how far inland the tsunami has washed. In 1971, less than one-percent of Canadians told surveyors they had no religion. Not quite two generations later, a quarter of the population say they aren't religious. Between 1984 and 2008, the number of Canadian teens who identify themselves as Christian fell from 85 percent to 45 percent. While the number who say they practice no religion at all grew from 12 percent to 35 percent.

Secularism begets more secularism. The culture moves away from religion, so the mass media move away from religion too. The further from religion the mass media move, the more they discourage religion in the culture. It's a vicious circle. The media's indifference toward religion tends to lead to little or no coverage at all, except for the obligatory nativity stories at Christmas and features about lilies and bonnets at Easter. The mass media prefer the easy alternative of sensationalism over thoughtful, well-considered religious journalism — witness the coverage of Harold Camping's end-of-the-world prophecies. Not for a second did anyone believe the end of the world would actually come to pass, yet the mass media jumped with great glee all over the story.

You know, and I know, that tabloid Christianity is not the real deal, and that secular society is not necessarily a happier or more just society. But how do we respond to these challenges? The best way, I think, is to be true to ourselves — to *live* as enlightened Christians, to *lead* as enlightened Christians.

We don't do it with billboards that compete against the billboards of Rev. Camping and his Rapture Enthusiasts. Nor do I think we try to do it with sound bites or 140-character tweets. Faith is complex and its impact on how we lead our lives is massive, subtle and intricate.

In a nutshell, I think we stake out our claim by showing that enlightened Christianity is about hope, *genuine* hope — not fear, not division, not self- or collective aggrandizement but genuine, transforming hope. I'm the editor of the United Church's independent national magazine, so of course I'm biased. But let me state categorically that I wouldn't do this job if I didn't believe *The United Church Observer* contributed to the advancement of enlightened Christianity in this church and in this country. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it expressed genuine hope for the church and its place in the Canadian conversation by measuring up to other magazines in terms of quality . . . by projecting the values of faith, justice and ethical living at the core of our

denomination . . . by finding the faith dimensions in stories that the secular media miss or willfully ignore . . . *by showing that Christianity isn't a sideshow.*

*The Observer* has been making a case for enlightened Christianity for 182 years — it's the oldest magazine in North America and the second-oldest in the English-speaking world. In the process it's also been winning more church press awards than any other denominational magazine on the continent — total of a 109 awards in the past four years alone.

Like the CBC links Canadians from coast to coast to coast, *The Observer* is the tie that binds our church together — it explains us to ourselves. It expands the scope of the church's ministry by going places and doing things that can't be done from a pulpit or a cubicle at head office. But *The Observer* also explains us to The Other — the non-believer, the seeker, the everyday Canadian who has strayed away from organized religion but who still embraces some of its values. *The Observer* insists that the values of the United Church be heard in the Canadian and global conversation.

I believe that *The Observer* and the 3,000 congregations in The United Church of Canada today share essentially the same challenge: to engage Canadians into a conversation about spirituality that transcends social stigmas and helps to renew the spirits of those currently in our pews while welcoming without prejudice or precondition those who are peering in from the sidelines. More than numbers, that is how we will measure success in the coming years, and that is how our success will be measured by others.

So . . . do we have what it takes?

That's a good and proper question to ask on an anniversary Sunday like this. Yes, anniversaries are a time for looking in the rear-view mirror and celebrating the things we have done well. But anniversaries are also a time for using the wisdom we have gained over the years to look forward. Think of a couple celebrating an anniversary. If all the talk over candlelight and wine is about things that are in the past, you start to wonder whether the marriage has what it takes to flourish in the years ahead.

I know as well as you that the United Church today is not the United Church of 40 years ago. I know that we don't have the clout we had in our heyday. Those were days when the editor of *The Observer* had the Prime Minister's private phone number in his

Rolodex. I assure, I do not have the current PM's phone number in **my** little black book. I know that the United Church actually has fewer members today than it did when it was formed in 1925 — and about half of what we had when membership reached its peak of slightly over one million Canadians in the mid-1960s. And I know that there are far more people in their 60s, 70s and 80s in our pews than there those are in their 20s, 30 and 40s.

But I refuse to accept that a church with fewer and older members is a church that can no longer be relevant. In fact I think you could argue that the current membership of the United Church has a higher concentration of committed, dedicated Christians than was the case when belonging to a church was the cultural and social norm back in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Back in those days a lot of people went to church because it was expected of them. They did not want to be seen **not** going to church. Today, our secular culture is often indifferent about church; sometimes it even frowns upon it. But people still come — not because they feel they have to but because they want to . . . **they feel called**. You know these folks. They're sitting beside you today. They are dedicated, generous and hopeful. They believe in the United Church and want nothing more than for the church to be there for their children and their grandchildren. Are you looking for a strength we can build upon? Then look no further than yourselves.

Those of you who read *The Observer* regularly will be familiar with the reader surveys we have been publishing over the past few years. We've discovered these are a fun way to take the pulse of our readership. In doing so, we've also discovered that the pulse is beating vigorously. Over the past three years, thousands of readers have taken the trouble to pull the pages from the centre of the magazine, think about the questions, fill out answers, fold it, put it in an envelope, address it, affix a stamp and run it down to the post box. Market researchers tell us that the rate of return for our surveys is so high it's almost off the charts.

Who are these people? The vast majority of respondents are over the age of 60; a sizeable chunk are over the age of 75. Three-quarters of the respondents in the over 60 bracket have some sort of post-secondary education, and fully one-quarter of them have a post-graduate degree. Almost 80 percent of them describe themselves as actively involved in their congregations. Oh, and yes — almost as many folks in the 60 to 75-year-old bracket filled out this year's survey online as they did the old-fashioned way with a pen. So much for being old and stuck in the past.

So what's the lesson here? One lesson is that we should lose the assumption that because we're older we can't, or won't, change. On the contrary, I sense that we are remarkably open to new ideas and innovations. You know, making assumptions about oneself is a dangerous business. Eventually you start to believe them. If, for example, we believe that our best days are behind us, that we are reduced to a remnant that can't change, then we'll start to believe it and everybody else will too. And that would be a tragedy, because I think the world today — the world right outside that door — needs the United Church and the values it espouses even more than it did when new churches were sprouting like dandelions in June and the pews were filled to overflowing.

The United Church has a vital role to play in confronting the mounting cynicism and despair in our society. Too many people today are wandering in a 21st-century wilderness, disillusioned with our political leadership, working in dead-end jobs — or in the case of almost one on five young people, not working at all. Too many people look for escape in substance abuse or online fantasy worlds. Yes, they need jobs or a better education or a maybe lucky break. But what they need more than anything is hope — **real** hope, a sense, as the United Church Creed affirms, that they're not alone, that there is a God who loves them and people who genuinely care about them . . . without any preconditions. Churches must engage these people and everyone else who is alienated, adrift or simply lacking a safe place to have conversations that matter — not by selling easy salvation, but by re-committing themselves to the dynamic of hope that is at the core of our faith — to live as enlightened Christian communities founded upon and sustained by hope.

Make no mistake, in today's context, communities of hope must necessarily be countercultural. Where secular culture too often encourages division and divisiveness, communities of hope build and enact relationships based on respect, love and equality. Where secular culture increasingly champions selfishness and accepts as normal the dishonesty and greed that so frequently accompanies it, communities of hope take inspiration from Jesus by naming injustice and demanding that it be redressed. And where secular culture measures the worth of things by how much they exceed what is actually necessary, communities of hope embrace the intangibles of the spirit.

In short, communities of hope offer a model for a different way of living. And the fact that they are countercultural should not trouble us. Being countercultural certainly did not worry Jesus and his disciples. That comes through loud and clear in today's

Scripture passage, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. The Apostle Paul writes: “We are treated as impostors, yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well-known; as dying, and see — we are alive; as punished and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing . . . as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” I read this as an affirmation that churches that are true to their calling will necessarily be countercultural. I can’t imagine a better mission statement for communities of hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe that The United Church of Canada is uniquely positioned to build genuine communities of hope at the local, regional and national levels. This is a church that was born of innovation and the creative spirit. Almost a century ago, people of faith, vision and courage looked at a changing Canada and concluded the new reality demanded a new way of being church. They sought out others who felt the same, and together they studied and prayed and argued and dreamed. And from that creative, *creating* spirit emerged a church unlike any other in the Protestant world, hailed at its birth as a model of Christian unity and service for the 20<sup>th</sup> century — a community of hope that re-articulated the Christian message for a young country to find its way in the world.

Just as those who created the United Church of Canada in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were uniquely positioned to fashion a denomination whose founding values spoke to the needs and aspirations of their time and place, those of us in the United Church of Canada today are uniquely positioned to show 21<sup>st</sup>-century Canadians that religion does have a place — an important place — in a post-religious society. And we have abundant resources at our disposal to make it happen — whether they’re **tangible** resources like beautiful old church buildings, endowments totaling hundreds of millions of dollars, a widely respected church magazine, or whether they’re **intangible** resources like the 3 million Canadians who express an affinity for the values of the United Church, or the goodwill that Canadians generally feel toward the United Church of Canada. The biggest sin the United Church could commit today and in the years to come would be the sin of irrelevance — to refuse to use our resources to build life-transforming communities of hope, to reclaim a place for enlightened Christianity amid despair and cynicism. In a strange way, I suppose, sideshow Christianity and secularism are a gift — they are helping to clarify our calling with each passing day.

Let me conclude by telling you a story. I was at a magazine editor’s event recently. There were about 20 of us gathered around a table. I was the only editor of a church magazine. All the rest worked for high profile consumer magazines.

We all brought copies of our magazines to share with each other. During a dull speech by some industry expert I noticed the publisher of *Walrus* magazine reading a copy of our summer issue, the one where we published the results of our reader survey on faith. I could see she was absorbed in it.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with *Walrus*. For those of you who are not, it is hands-down the best magazine in the country — Canada's version of *The New Yorker*. It wins so many firsts at the National Magazine Awards that they don't have room on their walls for all the plaques.

As the event was drawing to a close, the *Walrus* publisher came up to me and gave me her business card. She said she wanted to talk sometime, so we agreed to have lunch. When we met several weeks later she confessed as to how she had grown up in the United Church and read *The Observer* as a teenager. But like a lot of people she had drifted away from the church and the magazine. She went on to say that she was impressed by how the articles in *The Observer* spoke to values that are rarely articulated amid the din of modern life. Over lunch she became a subscriber, and *The Observer* and *The Walrus* agreed to co-operate on some measures that will help each of us reach more readers.

That was a good day for enlightened Christianity, a good day for hope. You too make it a good day for enlightened Christianity every time you go out of your way to engage someone in a conversation about things that really matter, or invite someone to imagine alternatives to cynicism and self-interest. You can score one for enlightened Christianity by introducing someone in your family or your neighbourhood to *the United Church Observer*. A relationship with *The Observer* is a statement not unlike the statement you make each Sunday when you come to this historic sanctuary. It says you believe there is a role for your values and your church in our world today. Put another way, it says that unlike Rev. Harold Camping and his misguided flock, you don't expect the world to end anytime soon. So let's get on with the job of building communities of hope together, to make it the better place God wants it to be.