

Sermon recap for Sunday October 1, 2023
Augustine United Church

Dear Friends.

This past Sunday, we explored the topic of religious practice in general. And more specifically, we explored the place of Communion in our religious practice at Augustine.

My message contained a few threads:

- When Jesus shared that meal on the night before he died, he made reference to a “new covenant”. And we explored the distinct possibility that Jesus was not himself starting something new. Rather may have likely been referring to a time when the Prophet Jerimiah spoke of God’s behalf – that God was at that time making a new covenant with the people. Namely that each person could know Godly ways by paying attention to their heart.
- We talked about a decision made by our worship committee to encourage me to explore the whole ritual of communion, including the idea taking communion 6 times a year rather than 12 – this in order to create room for us to grow in worship and we grow into our project that is Augustine Centre.
- We then asked ourselves the question, “When we come to the table then, what is it that God has put on our heart that we are bringing?” People offered these thoughts alongside their prayers.
- And then Jeff Carter offered the following reflection as part of that.

I hope and pray you are as inspired reading this as we were when we heard it for the first time.

Be blessed, be a blessing.

Rev Eric.

As We Make A New Covenant.....

As we make a new covenant – How did we get here? What do we bring to the table?

In conversation with Eric this week, I was challenged to think of the new covenant Jeremiah is about to make with his people and what this means here and now in this setting.

I cannot do this without coming to terms that together with Augustinians, I am about to enter into a new covenant regarding the leadership in this church. The symbol of that new covenant will happen in November. The work has already begun and must continue.

From this point on, I am going to speak very personally. I have chosen to break this reflection into 3 parts: 1. Looking way back in my personal journey to the factors that still play a part in what I bring to a new covenant; 2. What my life at Augustine has meant to me, and has held me - in short, why am I still here?; and finally, 3. What challenges lie ahead for me as a part of this congregation – challenges for which a covenant of service and collaboration demands commitment, promises and truth.

Growing up in a rural congregation and attending a Sunday School that numbered about 150 youth ranging in age from 5 to 18 (I have not counted them all in the picture I have, but I am sure I am close), I was exposed to the church, to the beginnings of worship in the Sunday School, to my confirmation at age 15 opening my experience authentically to worship and Christian life in a more adult sense. Recollections flooded my mind with memories of daring to offer an opinion, finding clarity with some issues, and not with others. Above all, perhaps spurred on with Eric's challenge, I am more interested in my impressions of what service in the church meant to me in my youth.

At Sunday School we all brought collection in our mitts – a nickel for the Sunday School, a penny for the Mission Band. So, in my mind, money seemed to be part of this, although there sure was a lot of talk about loving your enemies (and being bullied in school because I was a bit chubby, I knew I had a few of those) and I was never sure how I was going to do that.

I remember one day reading through the annual report of the congregation. I must have been around 10 years of age. To your horror, I am sure in the light of how we handle donations today, I was able to see the exact amount each member or family of the congregation gave to the church. Naturally my young eyes and mind were impressed that Mr. and Mrs. X gave over \$300 – a considerable amount in those days. I said so to my parents, and subsequently got my first important lesson about the church and my role. Both my parents opened these important points to me: Contributions to the church are not all based on cash– they can involve working for the church (I remember my mother and father working at fowl suppers, and more importantly before fowl suppers in doing everything from setting up tables to preparing the baking and many other dishes that went from our farm kitchen to the Town Hall to be part of what was every year a wonderful meal. I remember still the joint aroma of coffee and turkey I encountered when entering the hall.

My mother particularly reminded me that baking for example was a contribution to the church. Leadership in arranging to cater events also represented a contribution. My mom

and our good friend Mabel co-convened many weddings to bring important revenue to the church, revenue that may have appeared in the report, but certainly did not show up in the \$300 Mr. and Mrs. X gave. My father echoed this adding that I should not be fooled by the fancy clothes some would wear. The uniform of the church was anything but fancy clothes.

As a young boy going to church and to Sunday School, I often wondered about the people that attended. They all seemed so reserved and stuck up in a way – my youthful term for pious perhaps. There certainly was some kind of reverence expected. Singing seemed important. The choir seemed quite a chosen lot - all-adults – never any children’s choirs. The ministers in their sermons seemed intent on what I best understood as making up for my mistakes. I wondered what mistakes really qualified for this making up exercise. As oldest of my siblings and feeling the expectations for doing everything well, I thought that any mistakes would qualify. That question could still be asked.

Suffice it to say, that very early, my parents in reference to the church taught me about service. I seemed to be moved by some of the rituals of the church and some of the messages that got through to my young brain. Heck, even one of our ministers told my parents that I should go into the ministry one day. I would make a good minister! That thought sent my mind racing – how did he make that decision? Where is the nearest door so I can run? Could I even find a place to hide?

In summary, when I came to Augustine my “spidey senses” were sharpened and ready to avoid or to be wary of lots of things, people and practices. Here is what I arrived with:

1. Choirs can be fun. A friend of mine in college dragged me to her church choir because she knew I liked to sing. Finally, my first actual choir experience. I was terrified as I had no training and could not play an instrument. However, over the years, I found church choirs to be lots of fun. That early piety so weighing on me in my youth was not necessarily what I found in choir work.

2. Many at churches I attended seemed to be “do gooders” – wrapped up in the importance of what they were doing, but a great distance away from areas of our community that needed real help. There were those that, bless them took great pride in performing churchy functions, but I had the distinct feeling that’s as far as their service went. Others went to church because it was the right thing to do. Maybe it even got you points somewhere, but it seemed pretty hollow to me.

3. Some of my experiences whispered constantly in my consciousness that the world was anything but heavenly. All was not right with the world. There were those that needed enormous help and because of this need, were shunned by the church. How could that be if what I understood in some of the readings I listened to, that Christ blessed these same people and others not so in need, but humble in spirit and action in passages like the beatitudes.

4. Friends and fun in my youth always seemed to be entities outside the church. In my own mind, friendships in church just may have had that same empty quality that I used to attach to what I called “churchy” folks.

So, now that you have heard my “true confessions”, you need to know that I did not get stuck with them. This next part of my reflection will focus on what I found at Augustine, lived at Augustine, and knew would keep me at Augustine.

1. Choir was and still is meaningful and fun. It was Dorothy Lawson, bless her excellence and her heart, who asked me to come to Augustine in September 1971. The challenge and message of the music became meaningful to me. I sang my first major work at Augustine – The St. Luke’s Passion. I thought I had found the big surf and was thrilled at the experience. The churchy relationships I had learned to distance myself from dissipated. There was an esprit de corps and a sense of genuine fellowship that lasts with me to this day. I first met Keith and Helen Black in Augustine choir. Their friendship and loyalty are a gift both Judy and I cherish.

2. The loftiness of scripture, the repentance from sin, the care for one’s neighbour and the outreach to those in need all seemed to take on new character at Augustine. I soon felt a sense of authenticity here that had not surfaced in other congregations I knew. People prayed for the unloved and the unlovely and meant it. Programs grew in Augustine designed to be part of this meaning. The emptiness of the “do gooder” profile was not something I felt at Augustine. People walked the talk. Oak Table began in the Phoenix Room around the original oak board room table that has born the weight of Augustine and its worries for decades. My parents who had moved to the city by that time even volunteered in those first years, serving coffee and fellowship to whoever came through the door, no matter how unsettling their appearance, manner and problems might have been. A bit of a stretch from Fowl suppers and wedding receptions.

3. Prayer was and is different here. I was stunned that people would get up and pray for issues and people affecting them greatly. I shuddered at the thought of being able to do that. Heck, some even could not finish their prayers – they were so moved and in tears. Then, one day, I summoned the courage to enter the realm of shared voiced prayers. I cannot remember what I prayed for. What I can remember in sitting down after, trembling, and gasping for breath. The experience was that powerful. It is still powerful 52 years later.

4. Judy began to come to Augustine in the years when we were dating, and I was in the choir. When it came time to plan our wedding, 49 years ago, we both agreed that a church wedding was what we wanted, and Augustine was where we wanted it to be. With the ups and downs of every congregation, Augustine is still where we want to be. We had a brief stint in the 1990’s where we church shopped. It became clear to us that Augustine was home and we made it back here to stay.

So now to the covenant. What do I and we bring to the “table”?

1. This is a place of caring, fun and sincerity.
2. Our outreach and desire to make this world a better place is not only voiced in our Sanctuary. It is lived in our programming.
3. Music is a constant source of joy, inspiration, spiritual leadership, and if you have ever listened in on a practice – good fun and good fellowship.

4. There is a sense of pride in being Augustinian that is not arrogant. It is rather steeped in a shared experience of love and support and a long history of social justice and service.

Finally, I want to end with the challenge that the covenant table is throwing our way:

1. We must survive.
2. In surviving, we must remain relevant to ourselves and to the community
3. We may not always be doing what we have done with grace, fervour, and dedication. There may be differences – challenging ones that will drag us willing or not into the future.
4. We need to find ways to continue to support Augustine Centre – ways that complement what and who we are – not just because the building is operated and managed.

Thank you for listening to these risks I have taken. I hope they mean something in the great covenanting we all must do in the days ahead.