

Truth or Dare
201st Anniversary Service
Union United Church

“Truth or Dare” – the favourite game of teenage sleepovers! If you are not familiar with the game, let me explain it. It is not complicated. No need for a game board or game pieces. No need to keep score. No limit on how many can join. All that is needed is a set of truth questions and a set of dares. The game starts with one person asking the next player, “Truth or Dare”. That player must decide whether they are prepared to answer a question with the truth or if they would rather take a dare. The internet is filled with stories of how the truth questions can deepen relationships and how the dares can delight with silliness. However, no testimony to the benefits of “Truth or Dare” will ever convince me to play it. I may be the last hold-out on the planet but I have no intention of changing that. I like to control what I share of myself, when I share it and to whom I reveal it—and the thought of dares just makes me cringe. What if I do not want to do what the dare requires? What if I’m not able to do what the dare requires? Not playing this game! Not now, not ever! Truth or dare makes me vulnerable—I cannot control what will happen and I suspect the outcome will be negative. Why would I do that willingly?

The church has not been a willing partner in the events of the past twenty plus years that have made it vulnerable. There are countless reasons and you are likely familiar with them all. Some are beyond our control. For example, the United Church is a primarily rural denomination and cannot escape the consequence of rural depopulation. The next generation relocates—to attend post-secondary studies, to find work, to make a home. Even when rural communities grow, it is often with commuters whose first tie can be to the place where they work. Not all who are new to the area are connected to our tradition. They belong to other faiths if to any faith. That is another reality: the secularization of our culture. While many still claim to be spiritual, fewer claim to be religious. Church attendance is dropping. The number of churches is diminishing. The average age of those who are engaged with their congregation is climbing. These truths alone make the church feel vulnerable.

Add a world-wide pandemic and now we find ourselves at what I suspect the congregation of Union United Church—and Dorchester United Church—and countless other congregations are experiencing as the most vulnerable they have

been in their existence. The odds were already against them and this has only made it worse.

They find themselves in the same position Elijah was in: on the edge of society in a time of crisis. Elijah stayed true to God but had his hands full trying to convince the kings of Israel to do the same. When King Ahab ascended to the throne, he married Jezebel from neighbouring Sidon. Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon—and, contrary to what her name has come to mean in popular culture, she was exactly the kind of daughter any father would want! Jezebel continued to be devoted to the gods of her homeland—and she managed to convince her spouse to join her. King Ahab started to follow in her ways. That is why her name has come to be associated with infidelity—because she lured King Ahab from worshipping the God of Israel, the God who had rescued his ancestors from slavery in Egypt, into worshipping Baal, the god of Sidon.

Needless to say, this move was not one that promoted the security of the prophet of God, Elijah. Elijah found himself at odds with the King and the culture of his day. He condemned the King's actions and advised that, as a consequence, no rain would fall. Elijah found himself where the church now finds itself: out of step with the world around him and victim of widespread catastrophe. Elijah was not spared the consequences of the drought causing a famine across the regions. He lived through what all those around him were living through.

For his safety, he headed to the wilderness where we are told ravens fed him. Then God told him to go to Zarephath, a city in Sidon. Wait! Did you catch that? God sent Elijah to a city in the kingdom whose god Elijah was condemning. This is an important insight Elijah offers us from his experience of a time very like our own: the future depends on people and places far beyond the familiar.

God tells Elijah to make the trek to Zarephath. What amazes me is that Elijah does not show more reluctance! Elijah is not a prophet who is blindly obedient to God. The account of Elijah's life demonstrates him frequently arguing and complaining to God. I would have anticipated Elijah to offer a challenge, to protest "Why would I go there? They will have heard of me and of how I condemned their gods. It's not safe for me." To borrow from our theme, Elijah might have answered that this was a dare he'd be happy to skip.

But, he doesn't! We have these two surprises: where Elijah was sent and his own willingness to go. Neither fit the pattern of Elijah's life and narrative—and that was before the encounter with the widow! The widow was outside the city wall, gathering sticks. The famine had stretched to Sidon. She had supplies for one last meal for herself and her son, one measure of meal or grain and one

measure of oil. When Elijah saw her, he asked for a drink. Hospitality was a key element of the ancient world. It was not just a nicety, a gracious gesture of welcome; hospitality was the way travelers survived. It was ingrained in the woman to respond and to provide Elijah with the water he requested. Then he asked for what any traveler might need: some bread.

She regretfully explained that she did not have enough to feed him; she was gathering sticks for the fire to prepare a last meal for her son and herself. This was the end of their food. Her words revealed that she was alone, no husband or father to protect or provide for her. She was not anybody's likely saviour—a poor widow, with no place in society and nothing to share. How could she be the one to save Elijah?

What would it look like for us as the church to look to the people and places we have discounted or ignored? I have long heard congregations condemn Sunday morning sports at the area; I have yet to meet the congregation that understood its ministry as providing a Sunday morning program for siblings while another child was on the ice. But, then we would have to leave our buildings which is the second insight this passage offers. The truth was that there was no safety in the familiar for Elijah. He knew he was at risk in Israel but it was an even bigger dare to go to a city in Sidon!

There in that city, he met a woman who was also prepared to risk, to dare. She was prepared to share what little she had. She did not hoard. That it seems to me another important insight for us as the church: live generously. Too often we focus on what we have instead of asking ourselves what we can do with what we have.

Perhaps most importantly, what both the widow and Elijah urge us to do is to let go of our preoccupation with survival. Many congregations with whom I work start their conversation with “we have three more years before our money runs out” or “we’re do not want to upset members who might leave” or...well, I’m confident you can imagine more of this type of statement that reflects their vulnerability. We are afraid we will not survive. What the regional council noticed during the pandemic is that the congregations who were focused on God’s mission, on what they understood God to be entrusting them to fulfill, fared better than those focused on their sustainability. The two are not opposites. Every congregation needs to consider its future but, when the consider of its future becomes its sole preoccupation, it loses a sense of itself as the people of God.

Life lessons from Elijah and the widow for when we feel vulnerable and are dealing with situations beyond our control:

Leave the familiar

Go where you have never thought to go.

Meet with the people who are not valued by others.

Do not be preoccupied with your survival.

Be generous.

And, then perhaps most important of all, listen for the voice of God. Be a people engaged in worship, prayer and study, seeking together to understand God's call, responding to God's leading. I have no guarantee that that is the key to survival of the church as we know it but I have no doubt that that is the key to being the church.

On Union's 201st anniversary, I pray that this community of faith will spend the next 201 years nurturing people of faith who live this way, in a tradition that extends from before Jesus, from the days of Elijah and the widow, and that will continue long past the next 200 years. This is the wisdom Elijah offers us for our time. This is the witness those who served whom we will honour this Thursday on Remembrance Day gave us. This the dare—the risk—the challenge—the promise that is offered us in the face of the truths that dishearten us. The response to the truth is not despair; it is to take the dare. It's not truth or dare; it's truth AND dare! May we dare to listen, dare to leave the familiar, dare to venture forth, dare to partner with those often dismissed, dare to live generously—dare to be the people of God in our time.

Amen.