

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, May 10, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*Our Deepest Needs*

*“Rather than expecting a church to fill our needs, are we called instead to seek to fill the needs of others and in so doing, find our own deepest needs met?”*<sup>1</sup> These are the words of United Church of Christ biblical commentator, Kate Matthews (Huey) written for today’s text. I was drawn in spiritually and psychologically to her concept of “our deepest needs”. I ask myself as I look over my long life – professionally and personally – what would I say is my deepest need? When you think about your lives – long or short – work life, family life, individual life – what would you say is your deepest needs? When you look at the life of this faith community – during the past, during the current interim ministry time, and looking into the future – what would you say is the deepest need for Edina Morningside Church?

I believe that Kate Matthews Huey touches upon a universal human truth. Rather than the need for fame and fortune; rather than the need for work success and admiration from others; rather than the need for our children’s academic success or individual accomplishments; rather than our need for church growth or even financial stability; all of us are called by God to seek to fill the needs of all God’s children who are hungry, or naked, or homeless.

I believe it is our challenge to identify for ourselves individually - and together for this faith community – both what our deepest needs are and what are the specific needs in others that we wish to address. Each individual is unique and has the right to determine how best to use their gifts and talents to meet the needs of others. In the coming months, it will be our challenge to determine the specific needs we wish to address as we have in the past, and which needs we might feel God calling us to address in the future. I look forward to this exciting time of reflection, discernment, and covenanting together for a vital future for Edina Morningside Church.

I believe that our deepest needs are relationship based. We need to love and be loved. Here is where today’s text speaks to us. In today’s scripture Jesus said, *“As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”* (John 15:9) Three short phrases but full of meaning. *“As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”* These three phrases demonstrate we can know that we are loved – meeting one of our deepest needs – by knowing through Jesus that God loves us, that we are made in God’s image, that we lovable. The third phrase is the most powerful challenge we face each day, I believe, to abide in Jesus’ love. If we abide in Jesus’ love, we will seek to meet the needs of others, and thus have another of our deepest needs met.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_may\\_10\\_2015](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_may_10_2015)

Here is a story from my time working as the director of “Pathways, a Health Crisis Resource Center”. Persons who were new to Pathways were often offered one-on-one consultations with me. One of the consultations that I remember vividly was when Elaine came to see me. She was a woman in her sixties who was oxygen-dependent from emphysema. She expressed guilt and deep shame over her life-long smoking habit. She recounted having tried many treatment programs previously. Each of these offered her only short-term recovery, but always resulted in the illness of addiction returning.

She had recently become a grandmother. She did not want to smoke in front of her granddaughter when she was babysitting. She did not want her granddaughter to know that she was a smoker. She desperately wanted to find resources at Pathways to help her have a successful addiction recovery treatment – not for her own sake – since she had abandoned hope for that – but for her granddaughter’s sake.

When I suggested that she appeared to me to be filled with self-hatred, her response was, “Oh no, I don’t hate myself. I’d have to care about myself enough to hate myself.” My heart sank. I was shocked and dismayed by such emptiness – not to care for her own wellbeing. I acknowledged that it was remarkable that she was capable of caring so deeply for her granddaughter when she did not care about herself. I apologized to her for projecting self-hatred since she had not expressed those feelings. I said that I realized that I was projecting how I might have felt under her circumstances.

I then felt God’s presence strengthen me. I invited her to consider learning to love herself by using the many rich resources available at the center rather than to focus on getting resources to help her stop smoking. We talked for some time and she finally agreed to invest time in herself, and surround herself with others on similar paths toward renewed love. Over several months, Elaine became a regular presence in the center’s community. She became engaged in learning to love herself, and eventually volunteered her time to share her love and to support others. Eventually, her smile became radiant and her personality exuberant. I don’t believe that I ever knew for certain whether or not she had been able to give up her smoking addiction, but I did consider her learning to love herself and to love others a small miracle of sorts.

As you can probably tell from this story, I often felt as though I was the one who learned from the participants. I was not a teacher who offered answers to life’s questions, but rather someone who accompanied them on a healing journey where I learned so much from so many of them. My standard joke – which was more true than humorous – was that I believed every participant came to Pathways to further my spiritual development. The providers who offered all of their services on a volunteer basis often stated that they also felt as though they received as much from

the participants as they gave. Another affirmation of the words *“called...to seek to fill the needs of others and in so doing, find our own deepest needs met...”*<sup>2</sup>

In our beautiful text for today, Jesus also offers these words: *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12) When we think of commandments, we most likely think of the Ten Commandments that are primarily based in the “Thou shalt not’s”. Here Jesus is not only saying that meeting the needs of others is good for them and for us, but it is a commandment to be followed.

Biblical commentator Thomas H. Troeger leads us into deeper exploration of today’s text by emphasizing the context in which it is read. He says, *“Meaning shifts with the setting. That is an important principle...from the Gospel of John, for its words are always sounding in at least two different contexts. There is the immediate story line, the unfolding narrative of Christ and his ministry as recorded on the pages of the Bible, and there is the community that gave birth to the Gospel of John and the circumstances in which that community lived some three generations after Jesus’ earthly ministry.”*<sup>3</sup>

Today’s text also includes these words from Jesus: *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*<sup>4</sup>(John 15: 11) Biblical commentator, Troeger, emphasizes that Jesus and his disciples were facing the most strenuous of times. Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time that is coming shortly when he will not be with them physically. The time when the disciples will be witness to his betrayal, trial and crucifixion. The time when they will be facing the tremendous challenge to continue the mission that they have begun with Jesus despite their despair and grief.

In the context of the early Johanine community Troeger also suggests that it was a strenuous time. He says, *“...(They are) a community of believers at the end of the first century who themselves are now grappling with rejection and persecution.”*<sup>5</sup>

In reference to the context today, Troeger continues: *“Finally, what about us, the heirs of Christ and the community of John? How do these words redefine the meaning of joy as we move through strenuous times?”*<sup>6</sup> Edina Morningside church is certainly not facing the kind of persecution Jesus faced or the persecution of the Johanine community faced. But we are enduring strenuous times. Our prayer list demonstrates how individuals of this faith community are facing the death of loved ones, the challenge of recovery from a life-threatening illness, and the uncertainty of a complicated birth. As a community we have just experienced deep emotions around the end of a settled ministry and are just beginning what could be for some a

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_may\\_10\\_2015](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_may_10_2015)

<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

strenuous and uncertain interim time. Over many years members of this community – as well as most mainline Protestant denominations - have also faced the reality of declining membership, the struggle to fill leadership roles, and financial demands of maintaining aging facilities and of maintaining adequate clergy and other staff to not only survive as a faith community, but to allow important ministries to thrive. We also experience strenuous times when we look beyond our walls at our country consumed with racial tensions, with economic inequalities, and injustices for many within our communities. We experience strenuous times when we look beyond our walls and learn of natural disasters such as the earthquake in Nepal and learn of terrorist attacks, and ruthless murders of innocent people throughout the world.

How do we maintain the joy of which Jesus spoke in these strenuous times? We maintain joy by following the commandment of Jesus to love one another as he loves us. We maintain joy by receiving these words of today's text: "*...I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God*". (John 19:15) The friendship of which Jesus speaks is not the friendship of an acquaintance, a Facebook friend, or even most of the people in our social circles. The friendship of which Jesus speaks is one of intimacy, deep trust and of mutual commitment and affection. Our lives are filled with joy because Jesus is our friend and, abiding in his love, we seek to be a worthy friend to Jesus. Amen.