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The Message: Love Grows Here

This is hard. Doing what we are doing is really hard. Someone from First recently described the experience as "feeling like a divorce." To deny the pain, the difficulty, the challenge, is to deny all that went before: the journey of two peoples of faith.

The wrenching away from one way of being to another without choice of staying in the familiar -- it's hard.

Can we make it easier?

We have been trying:

Our Joint Amalgamation Committee, the leaders of our two churches -- these folk have worked faithfully, have demonstrated great sensitivity, asked tough questions, searched their own hearts, listened to their people and done the hard work of trying to find answers in the wider church at a time when the wider church has been distracted by their own transitions.

How can we be welcoming? Seeing our journey together as continuing at both locations -- seeing First as a wonderful place to worship on special occasions, meeting there, developing ministry and mission at both locations to reach into the community and to give us all an opportunity to reap the benefits of a beautifully updated building.

Listening and engaging in conversation, telling our stories.

I hope that we can move from feeling cut off from the past -- as in divorce -- to experiencing this merger as a marriage to which we bring our pasts and celebrate them for how they have prepared us to be together.

The best kind of marriages are centred in the love between two people, but it doesn't stop there. A stable marriage is open to include other family members, perhaps children, grandchildren, friends, -- it becomes a model for how people who are different can coexist more creatively together than they would live alone.

I hunted for a scriptural parallel for our journey, but believe it or not, checking in the concordance or googling amalgamation does not yield any scriptural results.

I found lot about merging secular businesses and organizations.

Where we perhaps see amalgamations as signs of failure, the decline of the church, in business, amalgamations, mergers are seen as successes -- growing the business, increasing market share, profits, efficiency, impact. And while the church is more interested in prophets than profits, there may be a lot to learn by reframing how we view our amalgamation through the lenses of successful amalgamations of other organizations.

That is not to say that we are the same as a business. But we would be foolish to ignore innovative ideas and new perspectives from those who have walked journeys that are in some ways similar.

When a large company buys out a small company that we have grown to trust, to rely on for a particular product, we feel the loss, but sometimes there is a gain. I'll give you a tiny example: my English Canadian mom always used Pears soap. Over the years, it got harder and harder to find. Family would buy whatever we could find in drugstores whenever we saw it. For her, it represented the England of her past. After years of trying different brands of shampoo, she settled on Herbal Essences as her preferred brand, though sometimes it was difficult to find as well. In a way, she chose a shampoo that represented her embrace of her new home. Perversely, since she died, I began to notice Pears soap and Herbal Essences shampoo everywhere. Just recently, I discovered that Pears and Herbal Essences are now part of the same company. That's one amalgamation that has had a benefit.

My dear friend, the late Professor Brenda Zimmerman of York's Schulich School of Business, whose principles of change and innovation undergirded the amalgamation of The Trillium Health Partners hospital group, used the metaphor of marriage to determine what the most important factors were for a successful amalgamation.

Every minister tells every couple preparing for marriage that the most important factors for success in their marriage will be communication and faithfulness.

Brenda took that and applied it to merging companies: positive conversations would be the most important factors for successful mergers. Not just any conversations, but conversations in which we truly listen to each other, don't assume that our way is the better way or that we know how the other feels. Paying attention in our conversations to what is favourable, optimistic, hopeful, appreciative, praise, respectful, will lead to healthy relationships and that will build a strong community of faith.

Communication and faithfulness make for a solid marriage and a healthy merger.

We have a gift that a lot of amalgamations don't have: the resilience of faith.

As we begin this new ministry, it's helpful to look back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry:

His baptism identifies Jesus as loved by God

our baptism identifies us as loved by God

He was about thirty years old -- he brought life experience to his ministry

We bring each of our faith journeys -- we are our stories.

We have a long genealogy for Jesus -- which I spared you hearing in detail. But it goes right back to God!

It helps us to ask the question: Where do we come from? Our ancestors -- Peter Jones, Ojibwa chief, Margaret Merigold - the stories of who and what brought us to this place - elders who hold a rich heritage.

What we pay attention to will define us - how the spirit has moved in and through this community. - long history so much to mine -- stories of those who have died

Knowing our stories can give us what we need to be resilient in the face of change -- for instance, one concern for folk is losing the name of their church. But yesterday, I counted, and Christ Church has had five name changes, First likely three, the first being in Anishinaabemowin. Each congregation has worshipped in at least four buildings on at least two sites each.

Once Jesus has been baptised, his life experience recognized, his ancestry lifted up to identify who he is, then it's the wilderness for him -- a time of testing -- stepping into an unknown future with lots of challenges.

We are a new Christian community. The beginning of Jesus' ministry points us to what we need, what we already have, for our journey together in ministry.

The future is unknown, but the past will sustain us.

There will be challenge but this is also a fresh start.

Change is hard but Jesus showed us the way. When we feel uncomfortable, sad for the past, grumpy with having to put up with so much that is different, we might look to the rest of Jesus' ministry: he didn't try to solve the problems of his time with the same assumptions that created the problems.

His beginnings prepared Jesus -- baptism, life experience, where he came from and being tested in the wilderness, prepared him to encounter the Sadducees and Pharisees in a totally new way, destroying the old rules that stifled and replacing them with the rule of love.

Love can grow here. We have God, the people we're going to spend eternity with, the stories of the faith of our ancestors -- stories, of endurance, of hope in difficult times, of wisdom honed by hardship, of leadership from dozens of ministers and hundreds of members. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and the presence of God's spirit around and within us. No matter how difficult this is, it is doable because of the firm foundation Jesus has given us in our faith, and our willingness to talk to each other in love.