

January 29, 2012
UCW 50th Anniversary Service
Ruth 1-4; Luke 10 and John 11

I am so very pleased to have been asked by our UCW to preach today's Fiftieth Anniversary service. I have long been in awe of the United Church Women, so what a joy to me to be the one to speak the words of appreciation which we all want to express today.

In fact, let me begin by sharing the fact that the Chair of the Council of First-St Andrew's is sending a letter of commendation, thanking the UCW for its contribution to the health and well-being of this congregation over the last half-century. It says in part, "The UCW has been an inspiration to all of us and as you celebrate this important milestone, take some time to reflect on where you have been and rejoice in your accomplishments." United Church Women, please receive this heartfelt appreciation from the elders of our community.

Here on our communion table today you will have noticed something a little different. We often set this table for the community to gather around. Every week we lay baskets on it, and dedicate our offering gifts. Some weeks we lay the bread and the cup here, and invite everyone to the feast of Jesus Christ. But today it is set a little differently. I hope you noticed the linen table cloth, the silver teapot and the delicate china tea cups. The table is laid for hospitality! We are celebrating the ministry of a fine cup of tea!

Not everyone knows how to make a really good cup of tea. I shuddered to hear one person who phoned in to a show on the CBC on the perfect cup of tea. Whoever she was, this poor benighted soul took a tea bag, slung it in a mug of cold water, and heaved the catastrophic concoction into the microwave. I can barely bring myself to share that thought with you now.

Because you know what I know: that a fine cup of tea is made with care. It takes intention. It takes time. It takes the right ingredients and the right frame of mind. Join me now as we brew: the UCW cup of tea.

The finest teas are grown on plantations far, far from Canada, in exotic parts of the world. Just like Naomi, leaving her homeland in Judah and travelling to distant Moab to raise her sons and her family, anyone intent on the best tea must be open to all that the world has to offer.

When the UCW was created it inherited the passion of the Women's Missionary Society which preceded it, which had connected women to the excitement of the rapidly emerging world. UCW members in the smallest pastoral charges in Canada were united in their efforts to support missionaries wherever there was a need. With egg money, with pin money, with money magically spirited out of family budgets, with the Fellowship of the Least Coin, women found ways to scrimp and save their pennies, pool them, and pay missionary salaries. They supported doctors, nurses, ministers, deaconesses, and educators, because they believed that no matter where you lived in the world, you deserved a chance. Our own Margaret Wonfor was one such adventurer, heading out to Pincher's Creek, Alberta, as a young woman dedicated to improving the lives of the migrant workers in her care.

There is a lot of work to harvesting tea. You must pick each bud and leaf carefully by hand. Then there is the drying, oxidizing, crushing, tearing and curling.

UCW members are no strangers to hard work. In fact, one of the kindest things you can say of a UCW member is that she is “a hard worker.” There is no higher praise.

Jesus’ friend Martha may well have been the archetypal UCW member. We remember her most for her bustling activity in the kitchen. Ruth and Naomi, too, knew all about hard work. When they returned to Bethlehem as strangers, they worked late at night in the fields, gleaning the stocks that had already been harvested, in order to keep body and soul together.

Many UCW units are named after Mary and Martha, Ruth and Naomi, because UCW women have celebrated the parallels between themselves and these feisty biblical women, rolling up their sleeves, peeling the potatoes, holding the bazaar, knitting the prayer shawl. If there is work to be done, congregations around this country turn to their UCWs and are not disappointed.

To make that fine cup of UCW tea, you need your water at a good boil. You need the heat, to release the fragrant aromas that delight your senses and warm your palate. The boiling water in the UCW is the outstanding leadership training that it provides. In many ways, the UCW organization parallels the organization of the United Church of Canada. It has its congregational units and executive, presbyterial at the regional level and national coordinating body just like the General Council. Women from anywhere in Canada might find themselves serving on national committees and managing huge budgets. This was especially significant in the days when women could not express their leadership skills as easily now in the workplace, in politics, and through ordination within the church.

Carrying on with our fine cup of tea. You have travelled far to harvest the tea. You have worked hard to pick it. You have applied the boiling water of leadership training. Now you must set the table.

Our UCW table was set when two very different groups came together in 1962. The WA, or Women’s Auxilliary, existed to provide the ‘home-maker’ functions that every congregation needs, while the WMS, the Women’s Missionary Society, was out to change the world through outreach. It must have been a challenge to bring the two groups together into one, because one looked in and one looked out, but 50 years ago that great convergence was completed. A woman from our own congregation, Eileen Mackinnon, the wife of the Rev. John Y. MacKinnon, was part of the group working to make that union possible. We can still be proud of her contribution, and of our part as her church home at the time. There are two memorials to Mrs. MacKinnon here in our building – a picture and a piano – and still some women who remember this great lady’s presence in the congregation.

Mrs. MacKinnon is not the only FSA woman to serve at the national level. Jane Glaves, who will be leading our prayers in a moment or two, has been president of the national UCW. We are proud of you, too, Jane, and delighted that you have found your home with us now.

The table is set, the china is out, the pot is full of rich aromatic tea. All that remains is to sit down and pour, putting love into action. Our UCW just held its annual meeting last Sunday and quietly approved their budget for 2012. If you want to see love in action, read a budget. This group of dedicated, hard-working, mostly senior women has just approved a budget in which they plan to give away almost \$23,000. They are pouring their tea out for ELUCO and the other London chaplaincies, for Rotholme Women and Family Center, My Sister's Place, Daily Bread, Women's Community Center, First-St Andrew's, Camp Keemokee, the Prayer Shawl ministry, the shut-ins at Christmas and, the largest beneficiary of them by far, at \$15,000, the Mission and Service Fund. The outreach continues. Next time one of these women asks you to work at the Holy Bazaar, how can you look her in the eye and say no?

I have a friend who says, "the best cup of tea is the fifth, with a friend." Here we are, concluding the fifth decade of the UCW, celebrating the WA and WMS which preceded it, and looking forward to the years ahead. We congratulate our founding members, who have been in the UCW since 1962. We honour the Past Presidents and current president, who are with us today. We thank the executive of 2012, for their ongoing leadership, drive and vision. And most of all we raise a cup, the fifth cup, with you wonderful friends. You inspire us all to live as Ruth and Naomi, as Martha and Mary, as Jesus would want us to do. Amen.

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St. Andrew's United Church, London, Ontario
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