

Autumn 2017

**BRITANNIA UNITED CHURCH**

**THE**  **Britannian**

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## **Editorial**

### **Criticism**

Reverend Jim says that Heather Thuswaldner never criticized. I beg to differ. “Criticize” comes from the Latin *criticus* “a judge or literary critic,” from Greek *kritikos* “able to make judgments”, which comes ultimately from the word for “sieve”. In its neutral, objective meaning, criticism means simply a judgment, good or bad, of something or someone.

Heather was always criticizing, but her criticisms, her judgements, were invariably positive. We sat together for years and she would frequently say how much she enjoyed something: a trip, a book she had recently read, or even the newsletter. She saw the good in things, without being blindly optimistic. She served for years organizing, taking, and counting collection. Arithmetic was not her forte and, doing the collection count took her more effort, but she always worked hard and cheerfully and accepted help graciously.

With declining health, she knew she could not continue with taking collection and stepped away from the job. She still cheered everyone up with interesting, kind, and positive conversation which infected everyone around her. Even though she is gone, I hope there is some Heather in all of those who knew her.

Peter Bain  
Editor

## **Minister's Message**

“I didn't make it through the first day.” That was a doorway confession offered by a member of the congregation who had put her hand up and accepted “The Heather Thuswaldner Challenge.” If you were there, I'm sure you will remember it. We all pledged that we would not criticize anyone for a whole month!

Actually, as one couple left the church that day, they confessed that they probably wouldn't make it all the way home without breaking their vow. So, how did you do?

Last Sunday, someone commented at the door that the month was finally up. It was said in a way that suggested they (and a few other members of the congregation) were relieved. I think I caught myself at lunch making some sort of a critical comment. I tried to pass it off by saying “I'm not criticizing. I'm just making an observation.” Even I didn't buy it. The challenge was really hard.

It's sad isn't it? It's said that criticism is so much a part of our language and lifestyle that we can't make it through a whole day without it. In our society it has almost become a sport. Do you remember the first season of America's Got Talent? Simon Cowell quickly became known as the mean judge, for his harsh, critical comments to vulnerable, nervous contestants. He also became America's favourite judge for the very same reason. He said what a lot of people were thinking. It was insensitive, inappropriate; verging on cruel...and people ate it up. In the past year, Simon has lost his mother and become a father...it has softened him... and the show has lost its edge.

Simon's comments were unexpected, shocking and funny...until you remembered that there was a human being on the other end of the critique. Maybe that's why criticism has become so commonplace. With the advent of social media, people no longer have to whisper behind other people's backs (or at the back of the church.) The internet has given people a forum to make cruel, insensitive remarks behind the cloak of anonymity and it has become part of our daily news feed. Just last week Facebook was running a series of posts about “celebrities who once were beautiful and now are ugly.” I read one of the posts. Every one of the celebrities featured, was aging naturally. A few were showing signs of drug and alcohol addiction. Some of them were just caught on a bad day, or at a bad angle. I even thought some of them looked far more lovely and elegant in their later years than they did when being twenty and pretty came easily.

Yes, being critical is very much a part of our society, but does it need to be part of our church, and is that really how we want to define our lives? The woman who inspired the challenge was honoured for never criticizing people. She would find something positive to say to everyone, and about every situation, and as a result, she was loved and admired by everyone. Yes, it was a hard challenge, but it can be done.

The key is practice. “What you put energy into, you get energy back from.” The more positive we are, the more positive we become, and the more likely it is that people will say positive things about us! Yes, the month is over. But the hope is that one month of change will lead to a lifetime of love in word and in action. It starts with us. We can't change the world...or can we?

## **Carrots, Eggs and Coffee**

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up; she was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil without saying a word.

In about twenty minutes, she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl.

Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me what you see."

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied.

Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard boiled egg.

Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma.

The daughter then asked, "What does it mean, mother?"

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently.

The carrot went in strong, hard and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak.

The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its insides became hardened.

The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

"Which are you?" she asked her daughter. "When adversity knocks on our door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?"

Think of this: Which am I? Am I the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do I wilt and become soft and lose my strength?

Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, have I become hardened and stiff? Does my shell look the same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart?

Or am I like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavour.

If you are like the bean, when things are at their worst, you get better and change the situation around you. When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do you elevate yourself to another level? How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?

May you have enough happiness to make you sweet, enough trials to make you strong, enough sorrows to keep you human and enough hope to make you happy.

The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the most of everything that comes their way. The brightest future will always be based on a forgotten past. You can't go forward in life until you let go of your past failures and heartaches.

When you were born, you were crying and everyone was smiling. Live your life so that at the end, you're the one who is smiling and everyone around you is crying.

May we all be COFFEE!

## **The end of a journey**

### **...And the start of a new one**

The Ministry and Personnel Committee members are saddened that our journey with Mary-Lou Hulan, our music director, came to an end with her resignation effective September 10, 2017.

The congregation celebrated and rejoiced as Mary-Lou shared her musical gift with the congregation on her final day as music director during the service on Sunday, September 10th.

We wish Mary-Lou all the best on her next stage on her journey and we hope she and her family know they are always welcome to join us in worship and to continue to share their musical gifts at anytime.

The Ministry and Personnel Committee and the congregation of Britannia United Church would like to thank Mary-Lou for her time with us as our music director and for the many blessings her music has given us.

God bless,  
The Ministry and Personnel Committee

### **For Marylou Hulan**

#### **Thanks Ever So Much**

Thanks so much for all you've done  
And all you've given too.  
With every smile, 'twas all worthwhile  
And we owe it all to you.

For every effort that you've made,  
Each second of your time,  
We thank you dearly, most sincerely.  
Thanks for being kind.

Jamie W.L. Hill

## **I'd Pick More Daisies**

If I had my life to live over, I'd dare to make more mistakes next time. I'd relax. I'd limber up. I would be sillier than I have this time. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I am one of those people who live sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day.

I've been one of these persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do over again, I would travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and I would stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances, I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.

By Nadine Stair, 85 years old  
Louisville Kentucky

## **It's Bazaar time again!**

**Britannia's Harvest Moon Bazaar & Tea**

**Saturday, October 21 from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm.**

The popular hot turkey sandwiches and apple pie topped with ice cream are on the menu.

As usual the success of our church events depend on the help and support of the city's best volunteers! Sign-up sheets are posted on the bulletin board soon so please sign up. We are looking for helpers in the kitchen, the tea room, garage sale area, baked goods table, silent auction, and the Christmas room.

We are looking for Christmas decorations, books, DVDs, children's toys, jewelry (please see Dee and Maggie), silent auction items, small furniture, electronics and garage sale items.

Bakers: warm up your ovens and pull out your favourite recipes, our baked goods table is waiting for your goodies! Let's make this year's bazaar the best yet. Thanks in advance for all your help -

Kelvin Stanke  
P.S. No items dropped off until October 9th!

## **Angels in the Wind....**

### **The Journey of Britannia United's Syrian refugee Family Continues**

Rim (pronounced "Reem"), the mother of the family, has been attending Ryerson University in Toronto since mid-August after an arduous pre-screening and pre-testing process.

The course is an accelerated midwifery course, a 9-month program for those with previous medical experience. Midwifery is usually a 4 year program but Rim had been a practicing obstetrician and gynaecologist for many years in Syria. She is studying very hard and doing very well in this difficult course of study. A kind angel in Toronto has offered her friendship and a place to live while she is studying. Most wonderfully, Rim has just learned that she has been accepted for an intern clerkship at the Midwifery Group of Ottawa on Carling Avenue in January 2017.

Meanwhile, her husband Abboud has been working equally hard as a single parent to his two young boys in Gatineau as they start in a new school. Abboud is also studying French in college to ready himself for work. The boys Christian (8) and Jack (11) are now speaking and writing reasonable French and have moved to a regular school within walking distance of their apartment.

Rim's parents are still adapting to life in Ottawa under the guidance of Salem, Rim's Syrian-Canadian brother.

Rim and her family still need our help and support, especially during this critical time for Rim and Abboud, and depend on angels in Britannia United Church and in the community for moral and financial assistance. Donations may be made directly payable to Britannia United Church, with a written indication that the funds are intended for the "local Syrian refugee family".

We continue to be amazed at and thankful for all the angels who have supported this project. Friends and total strangers have come together to help the Shaao-Artin family become contributing Canadian citizens.

For further information, you can contact Don Cullen or Marie-Therese O'Sullivan at [britunitedref@gmail.com](mailto:britunitedref@gmail.com).

## **Britannia Woods Community House and Food Pantry**

Thank you to those who made contributions during the summer. Thank you to those who made contributions in September. Thank you in anticipation to those who plan to contribute either cash or goods during the rest of this year. Please remember to do so! This Food Pantry supplies emergency food relief to people in the Ritchie Street area. Rejoice with the administrators of the Community House that Ritchie Street with its reputation has not been in the news recently. They work hard to achieve this.

## **Our Sympathies**

To the family and friends of Heather Thuswaldner September 26, 1936 - July 26, 2017, and of Murray Jost, died September 18

## **A Lost “Sole” Connected**

Every sock has a toe and a heel, but the most important part of a sock is its “sole.” It is this “sole” that forms the essence of the sock. Even though socks always come as a pair, each one has its own personality.

Sam and Sydney were two such socks.

In the beginning, life was grand. Joe wore his socks proudly to all sorts of events: an intimate dinner party at the neighbours, a cozy evening spent watching a movie in front of the fireplace, and a game of bridge with his buddies. Joe would take off his boots, wiggle his toes and walk around on thick-pile carpets or on smooth, sleek hardwood floors in his socked feet. Sam and Sydney were proud when he showed them off in this way. They enjoyed being part of the celebrations: meeting interesting people, smelling the freshly cooked food and enjoying the lights and sounds of everyday living.

There was nothing more that Sydney wanted to do than protect and warm Joe’s feet as he read a book, did the gardening, or went for a walk in the countryside. But Sam grew increasingly dejected; he felt he was missing out on something. He wanted to get away, to try something new and exciting.

It was on a day when Sam and Sydney were spinning round and round in the warm, soapy water of the washing machine that a plan to escape his life of drudgery forged in Sam’s mind. Once in the dryer, he put his plan into action: he clung statically one of Joe’s shirts, embedding himself in the sleeve.

As Joe removed his clothes from the dryer that evening, he never noticed the sock nestled in the sleeve of his shirt. He hung it in the closet, and then began matching his socks, pairing them into little balls. When he came to Sydney, there was no Sam! “Where the heck has that other sock gone!” cried Joe, in frustration. “Why is it that I am always losing socks?” He went down to the laundry room and looked in the washer, in the dryer, on the floor, but no sock could be found. “Where in tarnation do these divorced socks end up? Maybe it has gotten mixed up with my wife’s socks! Maybe it has been swallowed up by the centrifugal action of the washer drum! Maybe it has been sucked up into the dryer exhaust pipe!”

He shoved Sydney in the drawer, alone, hoping that the match would show up after the next wash. Sydney missed her “sole mate.” She longed to be tucked up into a ball, with him pressed tightly to her.

Sam never did not show up. Hidden inside Joe’s shirt, he waited for his adventure to begin. He waited, and he waited and he waited. As time passed, he grew more and more miserable.

One day Joe’s wife was gathering up clothes for donations. She commented, “Joe, you might as well get rid of this shirt. You never wear it.” She flung it (and Sam) into a big green garbage bag.

“Now, finally, I am going to see the world, do something important, maybe even become famous,” thought Sam. He felt “footloose” and fancy free. He remained hidden inside the shirt, as the bag was loaded onto a truck and taken to the donation centre.

There, the shirt was pulled out of the bag and thrown into a grey bin where Gertie was separating and pricing the clothes. As she shook the shirt, out dropped Sam. She knew that she should send this odd sock to the rag-cut room, but as she looked at it, she decided that this sock was perfect for a special project that she had in mind. It was the right size and colour, and not too worn.

That evening, Gertie got out her sewing box and took the sock into her lap. She fashioned a puppet out the sock. She knew that this would be just the item that would sell well at the Church bazaar.

Meanwhile, back at Joe’s, Joe was cleaning out his drawer. He removed Sydney, and noted with regret, “I never did find the mate to this one. No sense in keeping it any longer. It’s too bad too because I really did like those socks.”

It was then that he decided he could re-purpose the sock. He took out a needle and some thread, buttons and odd pieces of wool, and he transformed the sock into a puppet. “This will be just the thing to donate to the Church bazaar.”

At the bazaar that Saturday, two young children with their Granny strolled by the craft table. “Please, Gran, oh please, please buy this little puppet for me,” a young boy pleaded. “Just look at him. He’s adorable.”

“I want a puppet, too,” cried his sister. As they walked the length of the table, they spotted another puppet. Finally, Gran relented (it was for a worthwhile cause after all) and purchased the two puppets.

As the sock puppets were placed together in the plastic bag, Sam and Sydney immediately recognized one another. It was the joy of socks! Sam then realized that happiness wasn’t about being on an impossible mission to do everything, see everywhere, and accomplish everything. He needed only to look within himself, connect with God, and value the simple pleasures that life has to offer.

The moral of this story is that to get peace of mind, you need only connect to your “sole.”

By Helen Hutcheson

## **Travelling in Denmark, Norway and Iceland**

It is always interesting to visit other countries. Recently, we experienced the extraordinary scenery and hospitality of several Viking homelands.

A surprise for us was the number of churches, big and small, everywhere – even in the most remote locations. As well, the Christian spirit of kindness was shown to us over and over again.



In Copenhagen, we visited the Trinitatis (Lutheran) Kirke. There we attended a monthly church supper hosted and prepared by members of the congregation. We were included as if we had been attending a similar event at Britannia. More than 130 people packed the hall and the meal was one of the best of our vacation. The key joy, though, was the people we met during the meal, including the priest. We were invited to attend a noon organ recital by one of the church members, who treated us to coffee and cake afterwards.

Later, in Norway, we attended the Sunday Lutheran service at Oslo Domkirke. The service included an orchestra, choir and soloists performing a JS Bach Mass 1. Holy communion was given and it was a very special experience, seeing people from around the world, protestants and catholics, attending the same service. In Bergen we visited the main church during choir practice. The music was very modern and moving.

Iceland had many small white-painted wooden churches and very prominent modern larger churches that served as landmarks throughout the country. Throughout Norway and Iceland, many small churches were scattered along the fjords and were attached to farms. Historically, wealthy farmers built churches on their farms as private places of worship and buried family members in the adjoining graveyards.

The beautifully kept churches in Scandinavia and Iceland were just as amazing as the rainbows and northern lights we saw.

Marie-Therese O'Sullivan and Don Cullen

## Church News

### Photo Directory Photo Sessions

In October, IPC will be here to take our photos for the directory. The dates are October 10 – 12 and 27 + 28. Please call or email Nicole Whitehead to book your appointment. 613-355-5521 or nicole.whitehead83@gmail.com

### Sunday School and Youth Group

Have started! Welcome! We are in need of teachers. This will be done in a team format this year with rotations if we can get enough volunteers. Speak to Helen Hutcheson for more information.

### Readings

There are Minute for Mission segments in the bulletin. If you would like to read, please sign up on the board by the stairs.

If you would like to read a scripture, please sign up on the bulletin board at the stairs.

### Fall Bazaar

October 21, 9am to 2pm. Please bring in your items starting Oct 9th.

Smith climbs to the top of Mt. Sinai to get close enough to talk to God.

Looking up, he asks the Lord. "God, what does a million years mean to you?"

The Lord replies, "A minute."

Smith asks, "And what does a million dollars mean to you?"

The Lord replies, "A penny."

Smith asks, "Can I have a penny?"

The Lord replies, "In a minute."

## Message from the Choir Director

Well, I really didn't think I would be writing something like this for the fall newsletter this year! Mary-Lou Hulan's resignation as Church Musician/Choir Leader took us all by surprise...in fact, it took her a bit by surprise as well.

As most of you know, last year was pretty challenging for Mary-Lou. She was trying to balance an active family life with a part-time teaching position, the job as Church Musician/Choir Leader, and all the while suffering from pain in her hands. In fact, Minni had been helping out with some of the accompaniment just to give Mary-Lou a break and her hands time to heal.

With fall approaching and a full-time teaching position beginning in September, it became increasingly obvious to Mary-Lou that something had to give. She was very concerned that she would not be able to meet her commitment to our church and our choir, and so she decided it was best to resign from a position she has dearly loved. It wasn't an easy decision. (We are very loveable ☺ )

On a positive note, Mary-Lou has accepted a position as Choir Director with another church. The position does not require any playing and it won't involve as many hours each week. We wish her well with her new position. The good news for us, is that her husband, Chris, will continue to sing with our choir. The two choirs practice on different nights, so this allows each of them to pursue their love of church music, while meeting the needs of their children.

For now, choir is meeting on schedule. We practice on Thursday evenings from 7:30 until 9pm. We are rehearsing four weeks of anthems at each rehearsal. We start with a vocal warm-up and end our practice with a run through of Sunday's anthem at the front of the church. It's a lot of work, but we are having fun too! Sunday mornings we meet at 9:45 to review the anthem before our morning worship.

Several of our members are not able to make the regular evening practice, and that is okay. We have always made provisions for these folks so that they may participate in our music ministry and that will continue.

If you are thinking about joining the choir, all you have to do is come to the practice or speak to Minni or me. There is no test to pass, reading music is not a necessity, but having a sense of humour is!

If you like what we are doing, let us know. If you don't...well...read the minister's message about criticism. ☺ And by all means, let's all pray for the work of our M&P and Search Committees. They can use all the positive energy and support we can send their way.

Rev. Jim, Acting Choir Director

## Ottawa West End Community Chaplaincy

This “October Calendar of Thankfulness” has a two fold purpose. Firstly, it will make us more aware of all that we enjoy and secondly, it will give us the opportunity to raise funds for the ongoing work of OWECC. i.e: the martial arts for youth program and perhaps family camp in the near future, for families in the social housing neighborhoods of west Ottawa.

If you are interested in this project, could you place this calendar on your fridge. At the end of October, your family could hand in what they have collected either through your church envelope or directly to OWECC as indicated on the bottom of the calendar.

Marilyn Bruce on behalf of the OWECC board.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 For a place to call home \$2.00	2 For every kitchen appliance \$0.20	3 For clean water \$0.50	4 For inside toilet \$0.50	5 For heat in winter \$1.00	6 For air conditioning in summer \$0.50	7 For a telephone \$0.20
8 For freedom to worship \$1.00	9 For your Thanksgiving Dinner \$1.00	10 For a doctor in your community \$0.75	11 For each club you belong to \$0.20	12 For the existence of OWECC \$0.75	13 For freedom of speech \$1.00	14 For each pair of shoes you own \$0.10
15 For every meal you have eaten out this week \$0.50	16 For every magazine subscription you receive \$0.50	17 For free hospital care \$1.00	18 For free education to Grade 12 \$1.00	19 For every picture on your walls \$0.20	20 For every watch/clock you own \$0.20	21 For living in a democracy \$1.00
22 For each car you own \$1.00	23 For employment /pension \$2.00	24 For close friends \$1.00	25 For nearby parks \$0.50	26 For a holiday during past year \$1.00	27 For your church and Sunday School \$0.75	28 For every coat you possess \$0.10
29 or each pet in your home \$1.00	30 For each television \$0.50	31 For Canadian citizenship \$ your choice	<p>Please make donations to OWECC via your church givings envelopes or send a cheque directly to:</p> <p>Rev. Neil Hunter, Treasurer OWECC, 1008-265 Poulin Ave., Ottawa ON K2B 7YB</p>			

## **Living Love**

**August 6, 2017**

So, if you missed last week's service, you missed out on the opportunity to share in something very special. I'm calling it the "Heather Thuswaldner Challenge."

Here's what happened: during our Joys and Concerns we spoke of Heather's passing and of her life, and of her remarkable ability to see the positive in everything. We spoke of how she never said an unkind word about anyone, she never criticized – she only brought joy to her family, friends and community, and she was always smiling.

And as we spoke about how she never said an unkind word about anyone/she only brought joy to people's lives; she never criticized/she was always smiling, it brought to mind the words of Anthony Robbins "What you put energy into, you get energy back from."

Heather put energy into caring for people, she was grateful for the smallest acts of kindness, she went out of her way to give a compliment for a job well done, she made friends and strangers feel welcome and appreciated – and she was happy.

Heather was living love, and her life was a reflection of the living love of our God and our faith.

As your Prayers of Joy and Concern unfolded, I was reminded of a sermon I wanted to preach, about criticism. I get very frustrated when I hear people criticizing each other, instead of building each other up. I'm not talking about the kind of criticism that has the ability to build someone up or make something better.

Webster's dictionary defines criticism as analysis, evaluation, assessment, appraisal, interpretation, explanation and judgment. This is the kind of criticism you might receive from an adjudicator at a music festival. The adjudicator, who is recognized as having achieved a level of expertise in the field of music, will tell you what you did well in the performance, and will offer advice for how it could be even better.

But Webster offers another definition of criticism, which is "the expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes." This kind of criticism is defined as condemnation, denunciation, disapproval, disparagement, fault-finding. It is described as an attack or a pot-shot that is intended to put down, broadside, knock or slam.

I don't need to explain this kind of criticism because I know we have all experienced it. The interesting thing is that this definition of criticism comes first in Webster's dictionary. It might just be a coincidence, but sadly, this is the kind of criticism we are all more familiar with.

I remember being part of a drama class in grade eight, where the teacher had us sit in the centre of a circle, one at a time, and then our classmates would either say what they liked about us, or what they didn't like. It was a horrible experience. I don't know

what he his intentions were, but that experience taught me the importance of being careful with our words.

When I was teaching lay worship leaders in Ottawa Presbytery and the students had to give a sermon and receive a critical evaluation from their peers, I never asked the students to say what they liked and disliked about a presentation. They were asked to comment on what the person had done well, and offer suggestions on how it could be even better. It is a subtle difference, but it makes a profound difference in how criticism is offered and perceived. It teaches, it nurtures, it inspires; it builds people up rather than tearing them down.

All too often we only comment on the negative. We are quick to say what we don't like, and to point out mistakes and flaws. This is all too common in our society, and it is far too common in the church. This is one of the main reasons people have walked away from the church. Negative criticism is seen as hypocrisy in people who claim to be living the Christian faith, and the church is perceived as an institution of judgment and condemnation, rather than a source of inspiration for the living faith of Jesus Christ.

I think criticism has become a habit in our society. It is socially acceptable to say negative things about others and we do it without really thinking. The internet has turned negative criticism into a form of entertainment, and it has also provided a shield of anonymity where people who can say horrible things without being held accountable for their words and actions.

But negative criticism can also be a sign of our own unhappiness or insecurity. Many of the people who are routinely critical, are trying to build themselves up by putting others down.

But - what you put energy into, you get energy back from.

When you only focus on the negative things in life, life becomes more negative. When you are openly critical of your family and friends, you can end up spending a lot of time alone. And when you fail to show respect for others, you are seldom respected by others.

On the other hand, when you are grateful, even for the little things, your life begins to feel more abundant. When you are positive and supportive and loving, people want to spend time with you, and when you show respect, you are given respect. It really is that simple.

That's what led to the Heather Thuswaldner challenge. I invited everyone who was gathered here to accept the challenge to not be critical for one whole month. Not everyone accepted the challenge, and some who did were worried that they might not even make it to the end of the day. That's funny, but it is also a commentary on just how common and familiar criticism is in our society and in our lives. Is this the living faith we cherish? Is this the living faith we proclaim with our words and actions? The answer is one we may not want to hear. But we can change, with a simple shift of energy.

In a reflection on Christ's proclamation "I am the vine, you are the branches" Suzanne Guthrie says that the contemplative life 'with its long slow costly training' (Evelyn Underhill) prepares the human person for the life of compassion, union with the holy... and with people."

She says "Life is grounded in community. We are planted with neighbours. Our vines and root systems enmesh. We drink the same water and breath the same air. Jesus taught us that you can't love God and not strive to love others.

This seems to be affirmed by the author of John's Gospel who, in one of his letters said that we cannot love God and hate each. Because "whoever does not love the people they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. (I John 4:19-21)

He says "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (I John 4:18)  
"Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them." (I John 4:16b)

Chapter 13 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is often referred to as the love chapter of the Bible. And as such, it is probably quoted at nine out of ten Christian weddings. But in fact, this letter was written to the leaders of the new Christian community.

Paul is basically saying that the most important thing about being a leader in the church, is to have the love of God in your heart. And then he goes on to define what that love looks like.

God's love is patient and kind. It is not jealous, or conceited or proud. It is not ill-mannered, or selfish, or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail. Love is eternal. It is love then, that you should strive for.

This certainly doesn't sound like the kind of criticism that condemns, denounces, disapproves, disparages, finds fault, attacks, makes pot-shots, puts down, broadsides, knocks or slams.

But can criticism be a part of a living faith? The answer is yes, but we have to be careful. Criticism can be used to analyze, evaluate, appraise, interpret, explain – even judge – but it is only considered to be positive criticism if it teaches, supports, builds up and makes better – and it must come from a place of love.

Before we criticize, it is always good to ask what it is we hope to accomplish, and why our opinion matters. Are we an authority on the subject? Do we have some experience that might improve the person's performance? Is it part of our job description? If so, then we may proceed.

I have found that when I am trying to offer positive criticism it is often better to start by asking questions instead of making statements. It helps me to understand what the person was trying to do. Sometimes that is as far as the conversation needs to go. And if I still feel the need to offer advice, it is generally better received in an atmosphere of dialogue and sharing.

I also believe that it is important to offer positives along with any negatives. If you feel the need to tell someone what they did wrong, maybe start with what they did right.

And we don't always need to point out people's mistakes. I once sang at an anniversary service for a church outside of Ottawa. I had just gotten over bronchitis and probably shouldn't have been singing at all, but didn't want to let the congregation down. It wasn't my best performance. The high notes weren't quite as high as they should have been. When I sat down, the woman next to me – who was a music teacher, church musician and choir director – leaned over and said “That was a lovely song, but it might be a little out of your range.”

The woman certainly had the expertise to make that assessment of my performance, but you know...I didn't need her to tell me I missed the high notes, she wasn't my teacher or choir director, and I hadn't invited her to criticize my performance. I was a guest in her church. The respectful thing to do, might have been to stop at “That was a lovely song.” She could have simply thanked me for coming, or if she couldn't think of anything nice to say, she didn't need to say anything at all.

I was embarrassed by her comment. I felt the need to explain why I had missed the high notes, and I was sorry I had gone.

So how do we respond to negative criticism, and unkind or simply unthinking people?

When I was younger and less secure, I used to apologize, explain, or say nothing at all, even if I felt justified or correct in what I had done.

Sometimes I would be drawn into returning the energy that was sent my way, which would often lead to conflict and argument. That was never helpful. As a young minister I learned that I would always be open to criticism, and it wasn't always something I wanted to hear, so I had to develop what I call my “shut up and listen” theory. Basically, if you listen long enough, you will hear what the person is really trying to say and you may learn something. And if you still disagree, they are far more likely to be open to what you have to say, because you have listened to them.

I don't always get it right. On less patient days, I have been known to say “Wow...if your opinion mattered to me, my feelings would be really hurt.” That's not always helpful either.

Typically it is best to enter into conversation. You can always ask “What do you mean by that?” If the person is just being flippant or mean-spirited, it holds them accountable for their words, but if they are truly trying to be helpful, it can open the door to dialogue and understanding.

For those of us who raised our hands and accepted the challenge not to criticize for a whole month, let me say that I know it is not an easy task, and we will likely fail, but we can always start again.

I would suggest that in addition to not being critical, that we add more praise, affirmation and gratitude to our conversations. I guarantee it will make the challenge

easier and as we start living our faith in a way that is more congruent with the life of the Christ we seek, we will be happier, life will feel more abundant, and like those of us who feel blessed to have known Heather, we will be a blessing to those we meet. Amen

## 1 Corinthians 13 Good News Translation

### **Love**

I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no love, I am nothing.

I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned—but if I have no love, this does me no good.

Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.

Love is eternal. There are inspired messages, but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they will cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass. For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial; but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear.

When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete—as complete as God's knowledge of me.

Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love. Love is eternal. It is love then, that you should strive for.

#### **Newsletter submissions**

We love hearing about your news, stories, poems, and jokes. Are you involved with another group or organization in the community? Please tell us about your activities and events.

You can send articles to [newsletter@brituc.ca](mailto:newsletter@brituc.ca).



