

“Unplanned Parties Are Sometimes the Best Kind”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church
on the Sixth Sunday of Lent, also known as Palm Sunday

Sunday, March 25, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 118:1-4, 19-29

(Parts 1, 3, 4 of VU #837); Mark 11:1-11

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The retrospective of the art of Ken Danby that recently was in the Sudbury Art Gallery featured, in all of the advertising, his iconic painting of a hockey player lacing up his skates. Like the parallel painting of a goalie, the player is no one in particular. It is a generic painting of “a guy” who plays hockey. Not Gordie Howe or Wayne Gretzky; not Bobby Orr or Mario Lemieux; not Paul Henderson or Boom Boom Geoffrion. Just someone getting ready to go out onto the ice and enter into a well-known Canadian past-time.

On entering the exhibit, the host of the gallery asked what we knew about Danby. “My colleague knows all about his hockey paintings but I seem to recall he did a lot of wildlife paintings,” I said. Of course my “colleague” and I had discussed the variety of wildlife paintings on the way in, and Catherine was far more versed than I was on the variety of paintings Danby had done of birds, animals, forests, flowers, and so on. But I really thought it was the only chance I would have to even hint that Catherine knew more about Ken Danby and hockey than anyone else who might come by the gallery that day. It was an unexpected opportunity for fun – the best kind.

Richard Wagamese invites us to think about being compassionate, and whatever compassion is and should be, it definitely is not finding the least demanding way to live. But it can come with commitment – and fun.

Compassion literally means to share with someone their suffering and pain. It means hearing what the other is dealing with, and not having an answer for everything. It means being silent as much as it means being articulate and verbal. It is not being outspoken that “I know what you need,” but rather being present enough to be able to say with integrity “I feel what you are feeling, and I am sorry.”

But the readings for today, and the theme for our service, is that being compassionate, feeling what others are feeling, can be honestly accepting and reflecting the joys and thankfulness of another. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the words of the Psalmist who speaks about the joy of God's presence and the celebration that ensues, speak of a sense of the joys that come from God, and the goodness of life when all is going well.

It takes a special person to be present for those who suffer, are alone and lonely, and who despair for the future; it also takes a special person to be able to set aside their own worries to lift up the celebrations and passions of another, and even be thankful with them, no matter what you may be facing yourself.

That is the life of Carol Stark. Stark is the self-described “crazy lady” from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She was featured a couple of weeks ago on the show “Returning the Favour,” where host Mike Rowe goes across America looking for people who have compassion for those in their community, and then “returns the favour” by honouring that individual in a special way.

Stark was a volunteer monitor at a middle school, and one of the boys in that school was bullied almost daily. One day he brought a gun into the school, and immediately was whisked away and not seen again.

Carol felt badly. No shots were fired, and no one was injured in the school, but she felt she should have done more to help the young fellow who clearly faced a very difficult time in school every day. In her words: “I knew I could have helped, and so now I do.”

She sees the opportunity and the best in any child or youth or young adult she meets. She is seen as “grandma” to many of those she has helped. Dozens of youth and adults say they would not have made it this far in life if it was not for “Grandma Carol.”

One year, a bunch of youth were homeless and living in the woods behind her house. She went out every day and made sure they had a hot drink and food. She did not check for booze or drugs; she did not lecture them on their lifestyle or life choices. In her mind: “Everyone deserves food and water and a place to stay. If you have no permanent place to stay, all the more reason we need to make sure people have food and water.”

Mike Rowe arranged a virtually spontaneous party at the local high school football field. News went out at 7:00 a.m. over the local radio station that Carol would be honoured that day. Mike hoped that Carol was not listening, and fortunately she was not. People were asked to be mum about the event but come that afternoon to the football field to honour Carol.

The bleachers were packed, and a dozen or more of the youth she had helped (some now in their 30’s and 40’s) came onto the field behind Carol as she and Mike addressed the crowd. As she was asked to turn around, already overwhelmed by the community response, she almost dropped to her knees in sheer shock. She embraced all of the young people gathered behind her, and they, in turn, offered her a rose, and shared their love for Carol.

I do not need to ask Richard Wagamese what he means by compassion, for it is writ large on the recipients of the compassion offered by Carol Stark in this clip.

(play clip on video screen)

Returning to Ken Danby, he also has much to offer about compassion. Danby was a naturalist from the beginning of his life. He was a dedicated bird watcher long before he reached the age of 10, and said that 1967 was his emergence on the art scene as he painted buildings, scenes, and landscapes around Halton County – places that had been there for a hundred years and were still in existence in the Centennial year of Canada. Within a decade, to Danby’s great disappointment and deep sadness, many of those buildings were gone – barns, railways stations, rail fences, heritage homes, and even a church fell to the

bulldozer over the next ten years. They had lasted over a century or more, but they fell within a decade due to urban sprawl.

Danby had a burning desire to preserve nature, and it empowered his painting. While his natural work brings echoes to the observer of the Group of Seven in their Algonquin Park days, Danby himself says there were times he felt that he was living his Group of Seven dream as he traversed the land and communed with nature.

His love of nature, and desire to preserve the gifts of creation, led him to think that we need to be more than simply looking for the cheapest way to live, or the least expensive product to buy. His passion for the land led to compassion for nature.

Living with compassion is not a bottom-line experience. We need to be willing to offer our best, our all, to be compassionate.

Jesus knew that all too well – he gave his life as a result of his commitment to seek to improve the world for us and for others.

We are invited by Richard Wagamese to live with compassion. We are shown by Jesus on his venture to Jerusalem and beyond the cost of being a compassionate people. Is it worth it? I will let you be the judge.

Autumn Peltier from Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island spoke to the United Nations General Assembly this past week to remind the world leaders that we need to treat our water supply as if it is human – care for it as we would our relatives and friends.

Compassion is a Christian word, for it speaks to our willingness to witness to the world the goodness of God, and be clear about the care for others, shown in Jesus the Christ. If we want to live with him, we must learn to suffer with him, and be sensitive to the needs of the universe.

Such a life is the basis for the great gift of faith and determination for the future we hold dear.