

“The Need for New Beginnings within Honoured Traditions”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
on Sunday, February 4, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

You may have experienced this – maybe you are going through it now, so the very mention of the challenge could be painful and perhaps personally disturbing. We do that as ministers in our preaching. I can assure you that I never do it deliberately (nor does Catherine), and sermons often get changed because an illustration that seemed benign yet helpful becomes too personal for someone in the congregation or community by the events of the week or month before. To hear at the door “you were preaching to me today” can only be comforting if we know we were not deliberately and consciously doing that.

So I am apologizing in advance if what I am about to say is your story, or at least a part of what you are facing currently. Yet it is a truth that I think is universal and experienced widely.

You may have experienced this, as I said at the beginning – going through a personal issue or concern, struggle or health worry, and you feel no one cares for you, ignores your pain and uncertainty, and dismisses your worries.

I spent part of a day this week working through an appropriate way to remember the life of a dear friend and adopted family member. More accurately, I am the one all but adopted into this family.

Yet as we discussed the service for a much loved mother and wife and friend, including the place, timing and format, her daughter said: “I received little support from my colleagues. When they heard that I was taking time off to be with my mother because she was dying, they all but dismissed me. ‘How do you know? Are you sure you aren’t exaggerating?’” She said there was a sad yet perverse irony that her mother died two weeks before her scheduled return to work. “They can’t say I was over-reacting now.”

Not being heard, or respected, or appreciated, or listened to, collectively, represents collectively one of the greatest disappointments in life. That is why Jesus’ healings are so important in the Bible. He listened to people.

When people came into his presence, they knew that they would be treated with respect. He did not dismiss them or ignore them.

We can spend a lot of time and energy trying to understand how he healed, or what conditions people had. We know that it was the norm in Jesus’ day to see illness as related to spiritual dis-ease.

But beyond trying to analyze the condition and healing process, we should simply celebrate the fact that Jesus listened, and cared.

Now in discussing this reality with a friend yesterday, he remarked: “You know the gospel tradition better than I, but Jesus also did not get the response as far as I can remember from someone like ‘I do not need your help, I am on a regimen of diuretics and cleansings’ or ‘I am sure my new vegan diet will cure anything I might face’ or ‘I have cut out wheat and dairy products and I am starting to feel so much better – I do not need your help. Jesus.’”

Jesus listened and took people seriously, and they, in response, accepted the help and the concern. They knew they needed each other, and can learn from one another.

The healing stories for today begin with Jesus healing Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. What happens? Jesus “went to her, took her by the hand, and helped her up.” Far be it for me to suggest that is all that is needed to heal – get out of bed. But we have learned in the last 100 years that the healing process is aided when people do get out of bed after surgery quickly. Intuitively Jesus knew getting up and moving was part of the healing process. He had a sense of what people needed.

Why, even George Burns knew that. Though he reached the lofty level of being a centenarian in age, he was asked at age 80 what was the key to his longevity and excellent health. It was two-fold: “Smoke a cigar every day, and have a reason to get out of bed.”

When it comes to taking nature and the environment seriously, no one captures that truth in Canada better than David Suzuki. The well-known scientist and long-time broadcaster over CBC is the image of a person who cares about the environment.

In a book published 25 years ago, written with Peter Knudston, and entitled *Wisdom of the Elders*, they write about finding the appropriate mix of scientific insight and, as the title states, wisdom from indigenous elders of our country who appreciate and understand the land.

Early in the book Suzuki writes about the insights of a Harvard biologist, E. O. Wilson, who once suggested that what we must do in this world is foster *biophilia*, or a “love of life” – see life as our friend and companion – all of life. Wilson once said to Suzuki: “We must rediscover our kin, the other animals and plants with whom we share this planet. ...To know our kin is to come to love and cherish them.” (*Wisdom of the Elders*, p. xxiv)

As Suzuki has called us to have a respect for understanding of the natural world, Jesus called us to have a respect and understanding of humans and individual people.

One of the famous passages in the gospels that showed the truth of understanding others is the story of Jesus meeting a woman at the well in mid-day. He knows she has been married many times and now lives with a new partner. That is the extent of the story in the gospel, yet the woman goes back to town and tells everyone: “This man knows everything about me and my life – he is amazing!”

I do not know how you react to that story, but I would not feel someone knew all about me if they knew my marital status or simply where I went to school or where I now live. They may be important aspects of one’s life, but they hardly define who we are.

Yet the woman felt heard and appreciated in a way that went far beyond what the story records. She really said to people: “This person cares about me as ME, as an individual.”

So it was with those we met in the story from Mark’s gospel today. Jesus impacted them in a way that touched them at a deep level. Not all were healed, we must note. “Jesus healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases...” But he made an impact.

In life we look to be heard, to be part of a community that listens and cares, and seek support whatever we face.

May we experience that sense of being surrounded by care and concern as we enter into this service of communion today. It is a visible sign of a spiritual reality – that we believe in a God who does not abandon us, but supports us each and every day.

With that promise, may we go forward with confidence, now and always.