

“Experts Need to be Ninety-Minutes Away...Or Do They?”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury

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READINGS: Jonah 3:1-10 and Mark 1:14-20

While it is far from the most famous of Gordon Lightfoot’s songs, “Alberta Bound” is one that most have heard, I expect. With its lyrical and upbeat refrain: “Alberta bound, Alberta bound, It’s good to be, Alberta bound” to its distinctive opening “Oh the prairie lights are burnin’ bright/ The Chinook wind is a movin’ in; tomorrow night I’ll be Alberta bound” and its memorable phrase: “No one-eyed man can e’er forget/The Rocky Mountain sunset,” the song is a classic in the Lightfoot repertoire.

Or is it?

Well, an on-line poll asked people to vote this week. Is “Alberta Bound” a Lightfoot Masterpiece, Classic, or simply Great.

While a handful labelled it a “Masterpiece,” and a few more looked upon it as “Great,” the majority, by 2-1, voted it a “Classic” Lightfoot tune.

Now the voting may be a bit skewed, and the tally may be open for criticism. You see, those polled were not randomly selected. Voting options went out to people who have self-identified as fans of Gordon Lightfoot, and to even qualify for the poll they had to be vetted by a facebook site dedicated to all things Gordon Lightfoot before they were allowed to vote.

So is this insight on a “Classic” Gordon Lightfoot song, or a bunch of fans making a biased, non-objective assessment?

We can be quick to judge the objectivity and insight of others if we feel that there is any kind of bias or favouritism.

We expect people to go into service of others reluctantly and without any kind of personal enthusiasm. Why? We want them to be interested in the cause, not their personal gain.

That is how we portray the election of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The individual is pulled, almost dragging and screaming, into the chair by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, after he or she is elected. Beware of the Speaker who is too keen.

It may be why we want people who volunteer for leadership in the church to do so with a sense of duty or at least sense of call, and not personal enthusiasm, and we also use the call language when a minister seeks a new position. The United Church will elect a new Moderator this summer, and the kiss of death in someone’s election is that he or she looks like they really want the job. Maybe that is why barely six months before the election, no one has been nominated.

All of these scenarios imply that we must look long and hard, and not necessarily within our own community, to find the people to lead us that we need.

But in doing so we often overlook the very people who could be helpful and offer leadership.

There is a principle in business and organizational consulting, that an expert needs to be at least 90 minutes away.

That means someone from Sudbury may be more effective in North Bay than in Sudbury, and someone in Mississauga may work well east of Toronto, but not in Mississauga or West End Toronto – they are too close.

What does distance do in terms of offering greater insight and ability? Nothing at all, except there sometimes is an ability to see the whole picture if one is not wrapped up in the day-to-day activity of a congregation. It also means we may be more critical of those we know and more accepting of those we do not know, all things being equal.

That may not be a modern phenomenon. We have just come through the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany stories where Jesus is born outside his place of growing up, and those who affirm the birth include eastern magi who travel for days to be witnesses to the birth. Parents and especially grandparents may gush over a new born child, but when an independent authority evaluates their development or reflexes or awareness in a positive vein, then we feel even better about the young one.

Jonah was such a person – it took him over a day to go to Nineveh and proclaim a message of warning from God. He was the outside expert to whom people listened. He was the kind of person who could be effective in rallying a new way of being. His uniqueness was a plus.

So what about the disciples, and their call? There is no evidence Jesus went further afield, beyond his community, to call these young men who became disciples. Yet they were engaged in a profession and way of life different from Jesus. He went looking for individuals who were hardy, dedicated, and focussed on what they did.

That was the kind of person Jesus wanted for a disciple. It was not about “where did they come from?” but “are they ready and willing to do what is necessary?”

Jhaquiel Reagan was facing a crossroads in his life. The eldest of three children, it fell to him to try to keep the family together after his mother died. She had been the sole care giver for the family, and Jhaquiel knew that he needed to find a job if he and his siblings were to be able to keep their home and stay together as a family.

One morning he headed out, walking, for a job interview in his home city of Indianapolis. He persevered through sleet and freezing rain, weather not unlike what we faced yesterday here in Sudbury. As he cut through a parking lot on his way, he asked the owner of Papa Roux Restaurant how far it was to 10th and Sharman. The owner said that it was at least 6 or 7 miles, and in this weather you will not get there anytime soon. He should take the bus if he wanted to get there in a timely manner.

Jhaquiel thanked the person and carried on his way. This same owner, Art, saw Jhaquiel 20 minutes later when Art was doing errands up the road, and stopped to ask him why he was not on the bus. “I cannot afford the bus,” he replied, “until I get a job. I am walking to a job interview this morning.” Art agreed to give him a lift to the restaurant where his interview was, and the story may have ended there.

But Art got thinking – “Here is a young man who is walking over 10 miles {he had walked over 3 miles before he got to the Papa Roux restaurant in the first place} just for the possibility of a job. No guarantees.” Art continued: “That reminded me of stories my parents told, that in the depression people would walk 10 miles, uphill both ways, just to have work. Here was a modern, real-life story where someone was doing just that. If he is that determined to just get an interview, he must be motivated to be a good employee.”

Art posted that he would love to give Jhaquiel a job if he still needed one. By that night they had connected, and Jhaquiel was hired to work at Papa Roux’s, an Indianapolis Restaurant known for outstanding service and wonderful meals, immediately.

Art knew as a businessman, like Jesus knew as a recruiter of disciples, that if you want to offer the best, you must hire the best, and the best may not be a long way away, but they may be the very people others overlook for they reduce them to being evaluated by their economic situation or education level or opportunities that they have had, and not on the dedication they have shown, the ability that they possess, and the determination to surmount challenges to keep persevering.

I find more and more people are taking what have become known as “stay-cations.” Rather than vacate their residence for a few days or a couple of weeks (the root of the word “vacation”) they decide to stay at home but do things they otherwise might not do – around the house or apartment or even within the community where one’s residence is located.

A stay – cation allows one to realize that we need not go some distance from home in order to find beauty, interesting activities, or new experiences. There is no need to go a long way away to find meaning and opportunity.

We can be open to the wisdom that others bring, and celebrate the value of hearing voices that are not in our midst on a regular basis, but maybe we should stop and listen to the prophetic and inspirational voices that we have shut out because we already know what they are going to say.

Are experts necessarily at least 90 minutes away? Absolutely not, but experts only become experts because they have trained, learned, and listened to others who have mentored and guided them. As we learn from others, and share ideas with those in our midst, we continue the opportunity for wisdom to grow in our community.

Let us not lose the opportunity to hear what God may be saying to us, and offering others the experience of being open to how God might be leading them.