

***“Jesus Assures Us Not To Be Afraid of the Truth”***

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for the Third Sunday After Pentecost, June 25, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

***Aboriginal Sunday***

**Scripture Readings:** Psalm 86 (VU #803); Matthew 10:24-39  
(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The Good Hearted Women Singers of the Kitchener-Waterloo area are an example of a committed, talented group who have made their mark in a very musically diverse area through their wonderful singing and drumming, and equally important, their connection with community groups as well as their partnerships with other musical organizations. Their Aboriginal name, Mino Ode Kwewak N’Gamowak, is a living testimony to their commitment to do good from their tradition and understanding.

They follow the Seven Grandfathers teachings which are Wisdom, Truth, Humility, Courage, Honesty, Respect, and Love. Such teachings are the essence of who they are and what they believe, and form the basis for their desire to work in partnership with others.

On their official website is the following information: “Our drum group reflects a sweet grass teaching. One blade of sweet grass by itself is not very strong. It can break easily. When several blades of sweet grass are braided together, the sweet grass is strong and cannot easily be broken. The singing and drumming helps us to find the strength to keep going.” They go on to say in their posting that the group gains strength from each woman, and people come into the group, possibly lacking confidence in their singing or drumming skills, to work together and support one another – that is what helps them to carry on.

Recently they needed that strength of supporting one another in a powerful and real way. You see, they were one of the featured guests on June 13<sup>th</sup> for the Waterloo Regional Heritage Foundation annual meeting, recipients of an Award for Excellence for the ways in which they bridge culture, music, and language with groups such as the Waterloo Regional Police Male Chorus and school and community groups, including the Rainbow Chorus of Wellington-Waterloo. This is seen as a prestigious award, and the group was honoured to attend this annual meeting in order to receive the award, and further, to share their music at this event. All who attended, I have heard third hand, were impressed and deeply moved by the gentle, spiritual, humble presence of these gifted women.

They stayed for the meeting of the Heritage Foundation, and to hear the speaker for the night, Geoff Hayes, a History Professor at the University of Waterloo. Hayes is not new to this organization, as he had served for many years on the Heritage Foundation board. He also wrote a book entitled ***Waterloo County: An Illustrated History*** commissioned by the Waterloo Historical Society in 1997.

Once Hayes began his address, those in attendance knew this was far from what was expected. An aboriginal group had been honoured for the ways that they reached out to encourage and strengthen links between themselves and agencies and groups that are part of the settler culture – the people who had usurped their claim to the land and had taken over control of the regional assets. Yet here was a history professor praising the Lutheran

settlers of that region, saying that nothing existed and no one was in the region before German religious settlers came to the area.

The whole purpose of honouring the Good Hearted Women Singers seemed lost. They sat as a group, growing more and more uncomfortable, for the first half of Hayes address, and finally, one by one, they walked out, not so much in silent protest, but as one woman shared in a meeting the next day planning another major aboriginal-inspired musical event, "It was as if we did not matter, that the speaker did not acknowledge that we even existed, so leaving was not going to be disrespectful to a speaker who could not see us when we were there."

This past Wednesday was Aboriginal Day in Canada, soon to be renamed Indigenous Peoples Day, and for many it is a time for aboriginal people to celebrate and gather, but it should be a time when all of us appreciate, lift up, and seek to more fully understand the gifts and spirituality of our indigenous people.

Stories, like the one from the honouring of the Good Hearted Women Singers, are still too common. But they are far from unique to our age, or to aboriginal or indigenous people specifically.

Remember the words of the Psalmist in the passage read earlier. In one translation the thoughts are rendered: "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to Thee I cry all day long. Make glad the soul of Thy servant, for to Thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul." (Psalm 86:3-4)

There is no better example of an author who lays it on the line to God as to how he really feels and struggles with life and faith than the writer (or writers) of the book of Psalms. Faith is about honesty, and directness to reach God. It is about sharing how we feel and what we seek to do. And the Psalmist is crying out to God – probably literally as well as metaphorically – because he feels unwanted, not listened to, unappreciated, in short, dismissed. The Psalmist is not an Indigenous person in Canada, yet his feelings parallel many who are.

Jesus, in the Matthew passage shared, offers some disturbing thoughts that have troubled people of faith over the years. He came not to bring peace but a sword? He pits individuals against their parents? Is that truly what Jesus is about?

We need to read those words in the context in which they are offered. And he is saying two things that form a principle to our lives, and that help to develop our individual understanding of the world, even our need to be transformational in our approach to life as a people of faith, and we must be aware of these two competing realities:

1. We must do what is right, and if what we see as right conflicts with what our parents taught us, we must be careful not to hold onto the past at the expense of denying the opportunity to do good in the present and the future.

**AND**

2. We need to be honest about how we feel, and to be clear about what is our understanding on issues – and any attempt to avoid disagreement or debate in order to keep the peace will lead to even greater division and chaos. We must face tensions that exist in a clear, direct way.

That is what Jesus said, in so many words. “As you grow you will have disagreements with your parents. If you accept my views on God and faith, you may enter serious division with your parents and family. Be prepared for it. Do not run from it.”

And secondly, enter the debates of the day freely and gladly. Avoiding conflict can only create more conflict for people hide their true feelings and viewpoints, only to have them burst forth at unhelpful and inappropriate times.

Why were some members of the Good Hearted Women Singers planning the Sing Fires of Justice event for the fall of 2017 barely 12 hours after being dismissed after an award ceremony? Because they know what it is like to be in tense, difficult discussions. They know what it is like to be ignored, not even seen when they are present. And they are not going to allow that to happen without push back and a demand for justice.

People who speak the truth – even speaking the truth with love – can bring a sword of division to a community, or cause divisions within families, even between parents and children. Jesus knew that. We all know that, deep down, even if we want to bury that insight about truth. But we need not fear that reality if we are prepared to engage in the debate and discussion when we find disagreement and concern, and we honour people as people who have a right to present their views and position.

An aboriginal woman on CBC this week (who was part of a talking circle with 5 aboriginal members and 5 non-aboriginal members) was asked what she learned from that process. She said, in so many words: “We are all people, and as such, we have a story to tell as to who we are, and what we are about. And we need to share those stories if we are to have a chance to understand one another.”

The truth can be painful; it can be heart wrenching. It can, at times, be divisive. But Jesus assures us that we should not hide from the truth, but be open to it, share it, and grow from it.

And to that, I say “chi meegwitch, Manitou” or “many thanks to the Great Spirit” who encourages us, guides us, and gives us reason to seek understanding and truth.

That is part of the story I want to share, when given the chance.