

## **“Forgiveness”**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
on Sunday, August 12, 2018 by The Rev. Catherine Somerville

Scripture Reading: Psalm 130

We have a new minister coming to our church in October and we are excited! There is so much I want to tell Dave about this congregation, but I suspect that the most important and distinctive things, the unspoken things that make a minister realize how special a church is, won’t be what we talk about so much as how we live, learn and work together.

One of those pieces that I discovered very early on is your love of reading and literature, along with all the challenges and questions and curiosity that a love like that brings. Not a week goes by that someone doesn’t tell me about a book they just finished and they invite me to borrow it. I am backed up six books at this very moment. The suggestions help me to know a bit more about people, what they are learning, and they help me to broaden my own world view, because many of your suggestions would not be my usual first-picks. They usually turn out to be very good reads!

Today, I want to switch things up and tell you about a book I read that I think you need to read. (It’s the Bible - just kidding! You would expect me to say that. Although there is a major reference to scripture in the book I want to recommend.)

The book is called ***Forgiveness, A Gift from my Grandparents***, by Mark Sakamoto. This book is garnering a lot of attention at the moment. It was the winner of this year’s Canada Reads series sponsored by CBC radio.

The story really is about Mark’s grandparents, Mitsue Oseki-Sakamoto and Ralph MacLean. Mitsue was born in Vancouver, the daughter of immigrants from Japan. Her father was a fisherman, and while not wealthy, the family thrived in their new country. Theirs was a family where the children were consulted, where love abounded and each person was treasured. Mitsue became a seamstress. She met a man from Japan. They married on January 29, 1941.

This part of the book focuses on the removal of Japanese Canadians from the coastal regions of British Columbia. Thirty thousand citizens were relocated to the prairies, where they were forced to farm sugar beets and work as slaves. Mitsue’s family spent four years subsisting in a chicken shed on an isolated farm outside of Lethbridge. There she gave birth to two of her three children. Her second born was Mark’s dad.

After the war, the family tried to stay in Alberta, because they knew all too well about the racism that would await them back home. But Mitsue’s heart called her back. She returned to Vancouver, and never moved again.

Ralph MacLean grew up on the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. His was a tumultuous childhood with an abusive father and a broken mother. One of his earliest memories came from the time Ralph and his younger brother Ford taunted the owner of

the Chinese laundromat in their little town. These young boys hurled racial slurs at this adult, and they got away with it.

When the war came, it was Ralph's ticket out of a hopeless life. He enlisted in order to kill Japs - that is how he described it - and he was sent first to Hong Kong and then to Hawaii. He was present at the day Pearl Harbour was bombed. Three weeks later, Christmas Day, 1941 he was taken prisoner, and he spent the next four years and seven months in a prisoner of war camp. He lived on the edge of death all that time, starving, riddled with disease, barely hanging on. He saw torture and brutality that bred hate into his own heart.

Just prior to the camp being liberated, the Red Cross dropped large oil drums filled with canned fruit, meat, and chocolate into the camp. When Ralph opened one, he found a Bible. He took it, went back to his sleeping pallet, got down on his knees, and thanked God for sparing him. He opened the Bible. His eyes fell on verse 25 in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Mark: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

He did just that. He forgave his captors, and he went back to Canada. He spent the rest of life embodying forgiveness. Eventually he married. He had a daughter, who met a Japanese Canadian, the son of Mitsue and Hideo Sakamoto. The two families spent time together, eating, laughing, talking. They did not compare hardships or measure injustices. They had somehow managed to cleanse their hearts. Two boys were born, Mark and Daniel. Ralph's grandsons were half Japanese.

When the boys were young, Ralph's daughter's life spiralled out of control with drinking, drugs and abuse. There were years when the boys became like vagrants, sleeping at their grandparents' house, sleeping over with friends, and eventually moving in with their dad. Through those years, Mark would receive calls from his mom, asking for help. He would come and get her, his own heart broken apart, embarrassed and angry.

Eventually, he got his own chance and he moved across the country to Halifax to study law. One night, he received a call that his mom was dying from her alcoholism. He went back home, carrying the thought that if he could abandon his own mother, who in his life would ever be safe?

At the end of her days, all he could tell her was that she was loved, she was loved, she was loved.

A few years later, Mark married, became a lawyer, got a great job with the federal Liberal party, and had a daughter of his own. On the day she was born, he realized that he truly was a grateful man. His was a song of thanksgiving, for this little one had brought him to the journey's end. He knew that his life would be given to make sure his daughter knew that her dad would always be there. Ultimately, the example of his grandparents gave Mark Sakamoto the strength to overcome the traumas of his own life. The legacy of their forgiveness made his own healing possible.

These two people illuminated for him, the finest in humanity. Their hearts were his home. Here is what he wrote, "Forgiveness is moving on. It is a daily act that looks forward. Forgiveness smiles. It is not a transaction. It is not an exchange. Forgiveness has nothing to do with the past. It has everything to do with how you live into the future. It is moving forward rather than settling a score."

These two people, Mitsue Sakamoto and Ralph MacLean taught their grandson how to live. You refuse to be defined by the terrible hurts of the past. You have the strength to move on with hope and with optimism. They taught Mark how to be a loving and honourable man. They taught him that at the end of the day, there really are only two phrases we need, "Thank you" and "I love you", and those simple words have the capacity to get any of us through absolutely anything.

A few minutes ago, Freda read to us from Psalm 130. That psalm calls to us from the depths, from all those places of pain, depression, and alienation that leave humans in deep despair, drowning in watery chaos.

Depth and pain are the facts of life for every person on this earth. It is what we share in our common humanity.

And yet, in the darkest moments of our lives, we are reminded that God is the giver of hope. In the words of that psalm, we learn three characteristics about God; forgiveness, steadfast love and redemptive power. Forgiveness is the gift Mitsue and Ralph gave to their grandson. Steadfast love is the Bible word for grace. It's loyalty, always coming back. It is knowing that God does not abandon us. Love does not let us go.

And redemptive power is the ability we find to turn things around, and rather than telling stories of hurt, brokenness, and pain, we learn to tell stories of new chances, and see the people around us as equals, not as labels, to sit at table and share food with those whom you once considered to be your enemy. Mostly it is the ability to teach the next generation that each one of us is made in the image of the divine, loved, worthy and cared about. "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered."