

“Restoring a sense of balance”

A sermon shared by Catherine Somerville with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church on the May long weekend, May 17, 2015.

Psalm 104 and Leviticus 25: 1-17

It was a passing reference in a prayer book that caught my attention. It said that this week, this past Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, just before the end of the Easter season, during the time of Ascension, is known as the days of Rogation. To tell you the truth, I really had no idea what the word rogation meant, or why it belonged in church for that matter. Turns out, it is a word left over from the days when farmers were thought to be more essential to life on earth than attorneys or computer technicians. It’s a word left over from the places where children know that eggs start out warm in nests and milk comes from somewhere before it ends up in cardboard containers.

Back when most churches looked out on lush green fields, Rogation Day was the time to pray for the fruitfulness of the earth. With baskets of seed in hand, farmers would gather at the church, or on the edge of a field, and thank God as they prayed for a fair season with few storms and no grasshoppers.

I didn’t even know what the word rogation meant. But I know how the world has changed, and I know what I am missing out on.

Today, when we drive towards Toronto, we see almost weekly, how the prime agricultural lands in Canada have been sold out to real estate development. Farmers say they can no longer afford the taxes, now that land prices have been driven up by the encroaching city. Nor can they compete with huge farming mega-businesses, which control the local markets. So they sell their land - we cannot really blame them - and in the blink of an eye, another housing development goes up.

The story is ours, too. What used to be marsh and forest and bush trails in the south end of Sudbury, in the areas around Lively, in Valley East, places for children to explore, for deer to roam, for birds to nest, have now been razed, the creeks diverted, and no longer can we go out on a summer night and hear the song of frogs, or be surprised when we come across a clump of lady’s slippers in a boggy area.

You already know the story, so I won’t go through it again. The bottom line is one we are aware of, that the earth is in distress. Landowners say, “Let there be a subdivision,” or the owner puts up a sign that says, “No trespassing. Keep out.” And lo, what used to be a walking trail enjoyed by many, has now become a private park. It is the will of the owner that determines the use of the land, and it is a rare owner whose thoughts never turn to the dollar value of the land.

That's why this snippet from Leviticus, a small section in a much larger law treatise, is so intriguing. It overturns all our notions about ownership of the land. It is not yours. It never was, says God, through Moses, to the people. You are all tenant farmers as far as I am concerned, and you have my permission to work the land for six years in a row. Whatever you make of it, is yours to keep. You can preserve all those cucumbers into relish and pickles, or you can sell them at a stall in the market. You can eat tomatoes and strawberries until you burst, but on the seventh year, you have to stop.

God tells the people to put the tools back in the shed. Set aside your work boots, and the gardening gloves, for the seventh year is to be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land. There shall be no sowing, no pruning, no gathering into barns. There shall be no signs banning people from your property. If some wheat grows from last year's seed, it is there for anyone who needs it. If some grapes grow on unpruned vines, they belong to anyone who is hungry for them, including the bears and the birds.

During the seventh year, farmers are released from their work. It is all intended to be a foretaste of heaven. It is meant to be a preview of the world to come, where there would be no more toil, no more striving, no more division between those who have and those who do not. It offers a glimpse of a peaceable kin-dom, where the fields and the forest are as much a part of the bottom line, as the people who work the land. Even the workers need reminders that no one is indispensable and like the land they sow and cultivate, they too need time to rest.

Perhaps this lesson from the land contains a bit of wisdom for us, too. Just as we need to work, so we also need space in our living. God invites us to let go of the things we hold onto with tight fists, and give ourselves the freedom... to breathe, to just sit, to watch and listen and play. God knows that we need to let go of our fear, the fear that we have to work more, and do more or somehow we will be seen as lacking. We have to let go of the notion that there isn't enough. We don't need to always be hoarding and gathering. We don't need to live in ways that keep us from one another.

And God knows we need to spend more time saying thank you for all the bounty in our lives, and less time dreaming of more, because we are so busy looking at our neighbours and what they have, rather than looking with new eyes, that help us realize we have enough. Give us this day... this day, not next week, or next month... give us this day our daily bread. Give us enough.

We need that sense of balance restored. Maybe we can do that by touching the earth.

One of the most memorable visits I ever made, was to a woman in the palliative care area of the hospital. The day before she died, she had told her parents that she wanted to feel dirt under her hands again, because she needed that reminder of what was most important. So with tears in their eyes, her mom and dad, went to the hardware store and bought soil and a container and seeds, and they brought it all back to the hospital, and together they planted.

She died with dirt under her nails, and they made sure that those nails, her hands, were not cleaned but were left as they were at her funeral visitation.

We need reminders of how we fit together. We need to see bigger pictures than TV and computer screens can give us. We need to feel the sun on our skin, and glimpse the stars late at night. We need to rejoice at first light dawning and thunder storms. We need to sit under the shade of a tree.

Theologian Rosemary Ruther says that we need to allow ourselves the time to look at the water, observe plants, watch animals with close attention, and know that we are standing on holy earth.

She says, "This land that gives us our food, our water, the trees that clean up the air for us to breathe, all the green and growing things that bless our living with their bounty, are not resources. They are part of creation, and at the very least, we must live with the knowledge that the earth does not belong to us. It has its own dignity, its own holiness, its own life. Each of us was meant to know that all of life is connected, and we are called to live with the awareness of who we are, and what we are supposed to be doing here."

This past Lent, we brought pieces of First Nations wisdom to our church services. The words of Chief Seattle have left a mark on me. I can't help but think how they need to be heard again and again...

"This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves."

A long weekend, a Sunday or Monday, is the perfect time to go outside, and dig in the dirt, and enjoy the trees, and listen for the whisper of God who reminds us it is all very good. Pauses like this help us remember what needs to be tended in our own lives, what needs to be cared for, so it grows and flourishes, but also what needs to be pruned back, as well as what we need to let go of. We need days like today to find our balance, for it is a gift to ourselves and to the other people who bless our lives, and ultimately it is a gift to God, who made it all, and said it was very, very good.