

## **“We All Want to Speak a Language that Communicates”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church on Sunday, June 26, 2016 –

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Aboriginal Sunday

Scripture Readings: Psalm 16 (VU 738);

Luke 9:51-62

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

On this Sunday following Aboriginal Day in Canada, it is right to reflect on the ways that we as a people and as a religious tradition have not been fair to aboriginal spiritual teachings and insights.

After all, where once we thought it foolish to speak about the spiritual components of a “rock” or a “tree,” now we have thousands of people every weekend heading off to northern retreats and camps where they sense the spiritual renewal that comes from water lapping over rocky coves, or a cluster of trees renewing their spirit and their well-being as the breeze meanders through the branches.

In fact, I would suggest modern spirituality has more to do with aboriginal teachings than Christian teachings as it is played out in many families and individuals.

But at the heart of communicating our spiritual understanding is the language that we use. Each language has its way of communicating. And when we are not aware of, or sensitive to, the language of a people, we miss much of what they are trying to say.

Our misunderstanding of our aboriginal people began with the denial of their language. The very nature of the language – Mohawk, Cree, Ojibway, Lakota, Seneca and dozens of other tribal languages in North America – has meant that we have begun with a bias against understanding others.

The race is on within Canada to try to reclaim the aboriginal languages, but with full speakers dwindling, and the challenge to get speakers who are fully versed in the language as a result of current language programs, it may be a race that could be lost.

I have always felt that much is lost in the biblical witness if we do not pay attention to at least the basic presentations of the biblical languages – Hebrew and Greek in particular – when we are trying to understand a passage of scripture.

Both languages, not unlike most aboriginal languages, use images based on nature to speak about religious themes and truths. And so “spirit” also is “wind” or “breath,” and words for “God” have links to issues of “being” and “energy.” And so it is not crazy to think of God being present in the wind whistling through a forest of trees on a rocky shore. The Group of Seven painters figured that much out.

And so what does all of this have to do with the scripture passages for today? Jesus and the disciples pause in a Samaritan town but are not welcomed “because they have their sights set on getting to Jerusalem.”

That is a nice way of saying that they have stopped in their town, but have no interest in the town and the people within it.

We all have faced that experience. Meet someone at a gathering, and they seemed to be distracted, not interested in the conversation. They may have other things on their mind, or they may be more interested in connecting with a more important or more powerful or more famous person in the crowd. They may engage in talking with you, but have little interest in what you have to say.

Or visit a far-off land, and wonder why there is poverty so close to the hotel, when in fact one might be better talking with and learning from the people living in the poorer sections of the city.

You may be in a gathering where different languages are spoken, and you know when others are speaking a language you do not know simply to make sure you have no idea what the conversation is about. There are times when we must use a variety of languages to keep everyone in the loop, but speaking a language unknown to someone in front of them, and not offering a brief summary of the talk, is a sign people do not want to integrate their thoughts into the conversation.

The issue of any language is not what we speak, but do we want to communicate with another? Our body language is a language, and often we betray ourselves when we give off the sense that we truly are not interested in another.

It takes effort to pay attention to another's needs, and be open to what they have to say.

Jennifer Lombardo teaches how to communicate in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural environment. She says the first thing to do, even with people who speak English but live in a different culture and environment, and possibly English is a second or third or fourth language, is to eliminate jargon, and do not get enamoured with culturally-defined images.

One marketing director of a chocolate manufacturer was giving talks to corporate partners in other parts of the world. She assumed everyone could speak English, which was a problem, but even in England where she began her talks she used images, such as following the marketing strategy being presented would mean they would receive "warm fuzzies" from their boss. Turns out that is a North American term – people in England had the image of large Fuzzy creatures invading the office for some unforeseen purpose.

When speaking about simple, direct procedures, she suggested in Singapore that procedures should be as simple as picking low hanging fruit – but the translator, unfamiliar with the imagery and idiom, thought she was suggesting they would introduce fruit into their chocolate, thus creating confusion among the audience. Simple images get lost when we use language that does not communicate.

Jesus taught in simple ways that connected to people's outlook because he spoke about issues and concerns that all could relate to. That is the essence of his approach, so if you are attending a pow-wow or native crafts festival or art show this summer, do not focus on what is different from what we would wear or do or say, but look for the meaning within

the message. You will find, I am sure, a people who care about nature, honour the traditions with which they have grown up, and respect their elders immensely.

Whatever the language, this may be a good way to live and work and have our being. Care about nature, be aware of our impact on the environment, honour our elders and our traditions, and be open to new experiences and new understandings.

Such an approach is within the bounds of teachings we all need to hear.