

“The Challenge to See the Goodness in Everyone We Meet”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, July 2, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Canada Day Weekend

Scripture Readings: Genesis 22:1-14;

Matthew 10:40-42

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is an anniversary that has had a lot of build-up. And for me, at least, it seemed so anti-climactic, this 150th anniversary of Canada. 1967, the 100th, was spectacular. It went on all year. Expo '67 helped to fuel the flames of national identity as a nation. There was anticipation of a new age ahead. Everything seemed positive.

Not so much now. The world is ravaged by terrorists and people who are displaced; hope for the future is dwindling in political and economic chaos, and those who have been wronged are speaking up to be heard.

The latter point is a good thing, and maybe we should pay attention to those who seek justice and look for accountability.

There is a challenge to see goodness in everyone we meet, every situation, every concern expressed, every viewpoint shared. That is not surprising. If you are like me, sometimes the ideas and views that you hold onto the strongest are ideas that you received thanks to the insight of someone who taught you that your previous views were out of step, unhelpful, even wrong-headed.

Being able to see the insight of another, and even embrace those insights when they may differ from or clash with your own views, leaves you challenged.

No wonder Jesus celebrates those of us who can see the values of a prophet, or uphold the teachings of a righteous person. That is worth celebrating indeed.

So because of that, when it comes to Canada 150 celebrations, I am not so much focussed on this weekend or the year 2017, but rather I am awaiting 2025 – the 50th anniversary of the Beaver becoming the national animal of Canada.

Now recent attempts to dislodge the beaver in favour of the Polar Bear have failed, but why not celebrate this industrious, imaginative, hard-working and knowledgeable animal that has seen more of Canada than possibly any other animal? Why even “Joe” in a famous commercial of the turn of the century called the beaver a “proud and noble animal.”

Now beavers do have a conflicted place in history. Some say the desire for beaver pelts fuelled the exploration of Canada that led to expansion into the west. Trade for beaver meant that aboriginal guides were needed to help those from Europe to navigate the tricky rivers of Canada, and so beavers represent the first exploitation of our aboriginal peoples. Eventually conservationists expressed concern about the ways that beavers were trapped for their wonderful fur that adorned people’s bodies in coats and heads in beaver hats.

And so more recently beavers are seen as a lower lot, only good for symbols on nickels and cursing at when they take down another prized tree at a camp or cottage.

But I think beavers are a treasured animal. I am pleased that Sean O'Sullivan, then the youngest Member of Parliament ever elected as he won an election in 1972 just over three months before his 21 birthday, introduced the private member's bill that led to the beaver gaining national recognition in 1975 as our national symbol.

One's views on the beaver depend upon one's outlook on what the beaver offers. If we like things to remain the same, then we do not like beavers. Beavers are a source of change wherever they go. They can alter a forest with their voracious appetites and desire to denude the forest in order to make a bigger and bigger dam. They are rarely subtle.

Beavers are quiet creatures with big personalities.

In 1987, the only year I have not visited my camp on St. Joseph Island in the last 35 years, the beavers revelled in the quiet afforded them. They cut down trees – not just small tress but huge trees; not just poplar and birch but pine, balsam and maple as well; not just a few trees, but dozens and dozens. If, in their desire to fell a tree they needed to remove another tree that held up their prey, they cut it down with their incredible teeth.

Their main dam rose to over 10 feet in height. A pond that had been about 3 feet deep rose to almost 4 ½ feet in depth. My fire pit was filled with water, my traditional spot for the trailer was spongy. I looked for higher ground the next year when I returned.

Of course beavers only can use the smaller branches for building their dam, and the greenery for eating - they rarely use wood more than two inches in diameter, so that means many of these 20 and 30 foot trees were left on the forest floor to rot – some of them still are decaying where the beavers felled them 30 years ago.

Yet also evident is the fact that while they removed almost every poplar and most birch from my campsite area, a whole new forest of balsam, pine, spruce, and a little cedar has grown up in their place. Beavers may cause destruction, but they also renewed the forest and allow for a more stable and vibrant forest to be the result.

The trees left to rot have provided rich soil for a wonderful array of daisies to pop up this time of year, and enriched the soil that allows for other vegetation to grace the bush. In short, the beavers renewed the land in their seemingly destructive way.

Jesus lifted up for the disciples people who are like beavers. They renew and bring new life, but it can be painful to endure. They are prophets who speak with new insight and new zeal, but it may be hard to see what they mean or where they are going. They are people who seek justice and righteousness that may be hard to reach, but necessary.

Jesus celebrated giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty. The question is not "Why do you not have your own water?" but rather "What do you need?" Not neat and tidy ways of living – but neither are beavers in the forest.

Now if you think beavers have been given a poor rap in the media and common outlook, just remember the woodpecker.

Woodpeckers I see as the symbol of the life of the church. Now eagles have a well-accepted tradition as symbols of the Great Spirit, but for me I want to focus on the woodpecker.

Woodpeckers are persistent: they work hard all day from daybreak into the evening; they tap hardwood trees, softwood trees, rotting trees – why they even tap on trailer roofs and outhouse walls. Yet whether or not they get grubs and insects in their pecking, they never give up. Something like the prospectors of 19th century Canada and those who continue to do the vital prospecting work necessary for an ongoing mining community.

I want to celebrate the life of this land as seen in beavers and woodpeckers – animals of ingenuity, determination, and dedication. They show me what Canada should be about.

Beavers and woodpeckers are both capable of learning from their experiences. When a beaver gets a snag in trying to transport a branch or tree, it finds a way to bypass the problem. Woodpeckers, when they realize they are not pecking a tree but a roof or building, they move on to more appropriate territory.

And the celebration of Canada as a multicultural country is only possible when we learned from our terrible mistakes and challenges of the past. From the Indian Act to the banning of Chinese Immigrants to the imprisonment of Japanese citizens to the scourge of residential schools to the dismissing of women from jobs whenever they got married up to the 1960's, we are reminded that we must desire to be more open and accepting in a country where we have not always been that way – or close to it.

As people who celebrate a belief that God seeks whole life for one and all, and is against the sacrifice of people and the brutal killing of innocent civilians for any cause – a position I hear over and over and over again how lucky we are to live in Canada – we need to hear again the story of Abraham and Isaac. It truly does indicate, I believe, that God is not interested in human sacrifices, and such actions were an aberration to God's desires for human fullness. Yet Abraham had the idea that sacrificing his son would lead to greater acceptance by God.

The truth is, the journey toward wholeness and seeing the value of the lives of others is a long and difficult one. It is a challenge to see the goodness in other people, not just based on culture and language and skin colour and traditions and education, but because it is difficult to see beyond ourselves.

Maybe this Canada Day weekend we can be more concerted in our efforts to see Canada as a place where we reach out to our neighbours, and seek justice and righteousness for all. Yes, Jesus celebrates those who can give the stranger a cup of cold water, but in 2017 I am hopeful we can do more than that.