

“Water is a Sacred Trust, A Divine Substance”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
October 11, 2015

READINGS: Joel 2:21-27 and Matthew 6:25-33

.Family Therapists Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, in a book published in 1999 entitled *The Expanded Family Life Cycle*, have identified two main categories of stressors in one’s life – horizontal stressors, and vertical stressors.

Horizontal stressors may be family experiences, limited to oneself or immediate family, such as a car accident or house fire, the death of a loved one or the loss of a job. Such stressors come within the events of life, and have an impact on what we are facing, and how we cope.

Societal stressors of a horizontal nature are much more debilitating at times for they involve a whole community, or a whole nation, or even several nations. The Tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 would be among those experiences, or the flooding recently in South Carolina. Living through war and terror is a modern day horizontal stressor for sure.

The denuding of the forests in Sudbury region would be such a stressor as it changed the landscape and comfort level for many and then the reforestation of the last 40 years creates a response to that stressor.

Joel speaks about the hope of sufficient water, and fertile lands, in the midst of a terrible plague and war of locusts on the land, destroying crops. The book of Joel offers what we normally look for, even in the midst of disaster and pain or societal horizontal stressors – a sign of hope. Now when famine and disaster hits the fields, we desire water, but what about when we face flooding and too much water, as is the case in South Carolina recently? Can we really be open to the value of water when we have too much?

Thanksgiving is always that sign of hope in our culture. Whatever stressors we may face – horizontal stressors that impact our life as we live it, or vertical stressors of conditions imposed on us beyond what we have done or experienced, such as experiencing chronic illness, or living through family violence, or experiencing rejection due to discrimination for who we are, we all seek hope and vitality for the future.

That is what Joel celebrated, and the power of water in his writings is a reminder of the power and importance of water for us all.

We need water. As humans we cannot live without water. We cannot grow food and rear animals without water. Water is essential to life, and often has healing properties to cleanse and restore us when we are ill.

As I said, when we have too little water, we understand the need for water, but when we have too much – as Southern Carolina in places recently experienced the equivalent of a year of rainfall in Toronto within 4 days – we wonder about the value and power of water.

When life sets us on edge – through horizontal or vertical stressors – we can lose our sense of perspective.

Thanksgiving is a chance to put perspective back into our lives, and I wish today to share a couple of stories that help us to do just that,

One of those stories comes from Opera Collective, a recent story that speaks to those stressors of life.

Ten to twelve times a year, Opera Collective sends small groups of singers to New York City subway stations to perform. Founded in August, 2005 by opera singer George Kasarjian and a few of his friends, Opera Collective is a rotating group of singers, with ten core members, with many young singers just starting out in their careers in the music business, but they all share one goal: Make opera accessible. And when you want to share something with the people of New York City, what better place to do it than the subway?

It may not seem like the ideal venue to make music, but with ample acoustics and large audiences, Kasarjian wouldn't trade it.

Opera Collective is not unique to New York City. Tapestry Opera in Toronto, formerly Tapestry New Opera Works, located in the Distillery District of Toronto by the water front near the bottom of the Don Valley Parkway, had a program to involve children from Regent Park in singing that includes an introduction to opera singing. That program is now funded by the Toronto Foundation, Tapestry Opera today has a similar program for children from St. Jamestown, the most densely built high rise community in Toronto, where children get scholarships to work with classical and hip hop artists. Developing a new audience for opera productions and other classical music presentations is a challenge in many cities.

But back to Opera Collective. On Monday night, September 21, 2015, there was something special about the performance at Union Square station.

"I recall all three of us performing our strongest repertoire – and there were times during our stay there we had quite a crowd," commented Alexis Cregger, one of the Opera Collective performers. She saw a woman sitting and listening for quite a while.

"Any time anyone stops for longer than the time it takes to catch their train, it lifts our spirits, and it shows we're really touching someone," said Alexis.

Turns out that night they did that, and a whole lot more.

When the group finished singing, they found the following note in their tip basket:

"I sat and listened to you 3 sing for maybe over an hour. You guys are amazing. Today was one of the worst days on my life and I was contemplating suicide, but your voices filled me with a peaceful sensation and joy. Thank you, Ana (girl in the pink vest)

Now, that was not the first time that their music had touched someone in such a moving way. But it was a note that led to great inspiration for the singers themselves.

This thanksgiving we all come with different anticipations – some excited they have family home for the holidays, others missing family far away; some looking forward to special events, and others rueing the fact there is nothing special in our future; some travelling, and others planning travelling; some recovering from travels, and still others whose travelling days have ended.

We all have different experiences, and different stressors, and we all have different reasons to wonder aloud: “What I am thankful for this day?”

Pondering that question is not wrong or bad, but **not** finding an answer is certainly a burden to bear.

In the midst of life, may we all be able to find something for which we are thankful, may we all – each one of us – find a way to encourage others as we are encouraged ourselves, and may we all want to continue to live a thankful life through acts of generosity and of compassion for others..

The Rev. John Thompson of Oxford House United Church, among the ministries featured in the video shown last week, tells the story of travelling in Africa with his brother. They were talking to a young man and said they were taking the bus from Nairobi into the interior of Kenya. This young fellow said: “That is a long trip; you will get hungry, just a minute” and the young fellow ran off, only to return many minutes later with a paper bag with two hard boiled eggs inside. “Take this – you will need something to eat on the way.”

As John tells the story – “Those two eggs probably represented the protein for the whole family that day, but the young man was concerned the guests from Canada would go hungry on their trip.”

It is often those with the least have the greater capacity for thanksgiving and giving thanks.

Let us be open to see the abundant water all around us, the vibrant skies and essential air we breathe, the towering air purifying trees that are on hillsides now everywhere, and let us see the goodness of creation as a sign of the divine goodness all around us. When we see and feel that life is good, then we can see life is a sacred trust, and we are then equipped to reach out to others generously and faithfully as God’s people each new day.