

“Called to be the Church in our Neighbourhood”, a sermon shared with St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury on Sunday October 18, 2015 by Catherine Somerville.

(Thanks for the ideas from The United Church’s Stewardship Resource, Called to be the Church, Congregational Giving Kit, pages 22 and 23, and our Moderator’s message, dated October 14, 2015 from The Right Reverent Jordan Cantwell.)

I can’t help but wonder if Mr. Plumbean might have been on to something. He believed that dreams can change neighbourhoods and start conversations among people who have never done more than comment on the weather when they pass by on the street.

His dreams changed his house, his street, his interactions with his neighbours, and yes, even the neighbourhood.

So, if Mr. Plumbean can do it, why can’t we? I wonder if God might be saying the same thing to us, here at St. Andrew’s United Church in downtown Sudbury. After all, this is a house, the house of God, the place where we live out our ministry together in this neighbourhood. What might God’s dreams be here? And how might the fact that we find ourselves sitting here on Larch Street, impact our neighbourhood and influence the dreams of our neighbours?

I want to start at a tricky place... the issue of the niqab, and what is going on with our neighbours and some of the things they may be dreaming. Let’s have the conversation here; and let’s risk making our faith a part of the conversation. As we have heard and seen during this very drawn-out election campaign, the question of the right of Muslim women in Canada to wear the niqab has coloured many conversations. Our Moderator, Jordan Cantwell, the elected head of The United Church of Canada has been watching and listening, like all of us. She has been deeply disturbed by what she has noted. On Wednesday of this week, she sent out a letter to all churches and ministry personnel.

A portion of what she wrote is printed on the insert of your bulletin, and if you want a copy of the entire letter, we have made some available at the back, that you can take when you leave following the service.

Here is what she said.... “Words are powerful, and they have consequences. In the past few weeks, at least two attacks on Muslim women were reported in the media. It is no coincidence that these assaults took place at this time. As people of faith, we must speak and act in ways that challenge the ignorance and prejudice that fuel such hostility.

Jesus told his followers that what we do to the least of these, we do to him. As Christians, a fundamental principle of our faith is respect for the dignity and integrity of every person, including those who are different from us, for we are all created in God’s image. Our United Church creed tells us that we are called to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil.

These words are powerful, as powerful as hate words, and can have a profound impact on our society if we allow them to shape our attitudes and our choices.”

She continues... “Our faith instructs us to love our neighbours as ourselves. When asked to define a neighbour, Jesus answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbour, according to Jesus, may be someone of a different faith, a different culture, someone who doesn’t dress like us or pray like us, whose ways seem strange to us. What makes us neighbours is our shared humanity and our commitment to treat one another with compassion and dignity.

A good way to overcome our fear of someone who is different from us is to befriend them. When we truly know one another as people, not as stereotypes, we discover that there is much more that unites us than divides us.”

To that, I say amen. As a strong supporter of women’s rights, I struggle when I see other women wearing the niqab. But as a Canadian, I know I must support their right to express their beliefs, for our country was founded on values like respect and dignity and freedom for all its citizens. As a Christian, the story of the Good Samaritan calls me to remember what God asks... and I find myself thinking about others who are different, others who don’t dress like me or pray like me, someone from a different culture, and I realize that God does not see those differences. God only sees into my heart and knows what I harbour there, and how I treat others.

Like Moderator Jordan Cantwell, I am thinking this is the place of the church today. We don’t need to agree on the issues, (I am sure many of you don’t agree with what I just said, and that is fine), but we need to be a place where respect is shown, listening is offered, dialogue and discussion take place, and care for our neighbours is expressed. We need to make God a part of the conversation. It’s risky to do that. We may not like what the other has to say, but for the church to be a real presence in the world today, we need to have those conversations here... in church.

Those values are what led me to apply last year to work here at St. Andrew’s. I have long known that you are community not afraid to take risks. Think of the Out of the Cold dinner program. About eighteen years ago, a group of you decided to risk serving people a warm dinner, and to treat the guests--as guests. Here, they do not line up as in a soup kitchen. Here, people are served delicious and nutritious food on nice plates, greeted with hospitality by a legion of volunteers, blessed with a prayer before the meal begins, and wished all the best as they leave. It is just as any of us do when we invite people to our homes for dinner. That dream, started 18 years ago, has grown to such an extent that we now have partnerships throughout the city, and people flock to help with that piece of our ministry. That dream paints a vivid picture of St. Andrew’s United Church.

Another dream is Body and Soul. Dorothy Day, a Roman Catholic activist in the 1940’s said “Food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul.” A few years ago, Rev. Judith Visser and some friends started serving lunch to the tenants of this building. They served

more than food though; they offered food for the soul. Worship and singing were part of the program. One of the side pieces of this program, and if you can come and help us this week, you will see for yourself, is the conversation and laughter that happens. Living anywhere today can be a lonely experience. We are more isolated than we have ever been, due, I would say, to technology, which may help us connect with others around the world, but it can sometimes keep us from having face to face conversations with the people who live right next door. Body and Soul is another way you have added colour to the downtown core. You have said that people and relationships need to be tended, and they add such vibrant colour to the world. It is another way you as a church are risking your faith.

We are building partnerships with the students who share this space. During the first week of school, we greeted them with coffee and granola bars in the lobby. Tomorrow, (and I did plan this for just before Thanksgiving, but my life was a bit rammy last week!!), I am going to be handing out apples to the students, starting at 1:15 in the lobby. If you are free, I invite you to come and join me. When John and Diane and Sylvia and Bill and I handed out the coffee, the students were so appreciative of our support. Tomorrow, I am thinking it will be the same... And this is another way we are colouring this house of God with dreams.

A simple gesture and a small gift might just make a stressed out student's day a bit better tomorrow.

We served lunch to people on the street in June, and had 300 people show up. We help at the Aboriginal People's Alliance drop in centre. We provided warm winter coats to women on the edges last year. We collected a mountain of supplies for students at two schools and a women's counselling centre last Christmas. Our Church School folks helped us learn about a grassroots micro-loan organization called Kiva, which supports small business start-ups in developing countries. We hand out bus tickets and help when people come through our doors and need a friend at a moment of crisis.

And there are so many more stories, stories I am privileged to hear as you tell how you are changing the world, by your caring and your action. When we gather for worship, and sing and pray to what is most important in our lives, we are making real our dreams and adding colour to the downtown of Sudbury. When we gather for a funeral, we stand together and help to remind those whose hearts are broken that they are not alone. God is with them. And so is their church family. When we begin our meetings with prayers, we are colouring the world and saying that in this house, we do things differently. We ask for help, for we know that the answer does not lie with only one of us, but the answer will be revealed through all the voices that come to the table.

Mr. Plumbean's house is a delight to think about, because of the way it stands out in his neighbourhood. The palm tree, the alligator, the lion's head, the clock tower, the splotches of orange paint, and all those colours, they are such a contrast to the conformity of all his

neighbours. Because Mr. Plumbean's house stands out so much, the entire neighbourhood is eventually transformed and that street becomes neat in an entirely new way.

Jesus invites us to stand out from our surroundings. He told us to be salt, and bring flavour to the world. He told us to be light and burn brightly so everyone can see. When we do those things, that add colour and flavour to the world, we are living out God's call as a congregation.

Sometimes people get nervous when we talk too much about standing out as a congregation. Standing out can easily come across as condescension; churches especially can have a bad reputation for letting their morality set them apart from the world around them, like some sort of 'holier than thou' gated community. That's why it's important, not just to stand out, but to find ways to be part of our community, and find ways to make this neighbourhood better.

The exiled Israelites of Jeremiah's time were asking all sorts of questions about how to relate to their neighbourhood. They didn't particularly want to be there, having been taken off to start new lives in Babylon. Their preference would have been to be somewhere else, back home, living free in their homeland. But God encourages them to invest in their new community- build houses, and make this home, plant gardens and participate in the economy of the place, fall in love and start families, let this place and these people imprint on their DNA. For when we seek the welfare of the neighbourhood where we find ourselves, when we pray to God on its behalf, then we find in it our own welfare and blessing as well. When we invest ourselves, our hearts, our prayers, and our resources, into our community, we receive the blessing of God.

Jeremiah's words also remind us that the work we do as a congregation is done against the larger work God is doing in the world. Our creeds, our experience, and the life of Jesus show us that God is working to restore humanity back into relationship. Sometimes the fruit of our investments is not realized until generations down the road, but God is painting a picture. God is creating a dream. In that dream, people will come to call upon God, and we will pray and search and seek for the divine, and God will be known, because we will be restored into right relationship.

The work we do as a congregation is important because it allows us to realize God's dream for ourselves and the world. The work of this congregation is important because it allows God to say of us, "My house is me, and I am it." God's house is where God likes to be. And it looks like all that God dreams for the people of God and a world made whole.

With the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.