

“Seeking the Obvious is not Always so Obvious”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
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Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-26

We all have experienced, I am sure, situations where what seemed obvious was not all that obvious.

It may be we came to a parking lot and assume the line-up was at the entrance, but really the entrance was somewhere else. Or we may have come to a Tim Horton’s and assumed we were in line for service, but actually we were at the line of people who have already ordered. While a student minister, I oftencut the grass of the church and filled the paper towel dispenser as part of “duties as needed,” so often someone would approach the church and ask me: “could you direct me to the minister?” It was obvious that was not me.

This past week while on holidays I entered a restaurant with an incredible deal -- \$6.99 breakfast buffet, so I arrived at what I thought was a good time for lunch, parked in the first available spot and entered through the front door to make sure I was not in line long, seeing that people already were waiting there. I stood there for what seemed a long time – easily 5 or 6 minutes, maybe more, and the line did not move. Tables emptied and filled, and I wondered how that could be, as I was the third party ready to be seated, but I then discovered there was a side door that was also open, and the staff seated everyone at the side door before they came to the line-up at the front door that now was spilling into the street. Going to the front door may not always be the wisest move, I learned. What may be obvious to me was not obvious to others.

Years ago in Ammon, Jordan, as I visited that country to attend a peace conference on behalf of the United Church, I went to the hotel concierge to get instructions on a local shopping area. I understood it was only a ten or fifteen minute walk from the hotel, and after I got the details for my journey I asked, as dusk was settling on the terrain: “I am wondering are the stores still open, and is it safe to go to that area at this time?”

The concierge, clearly ticked at my question but ever polite and respectful, said: "Sir, this is a major city but we respect our guests to our city; the stores are opened late, and no one will bother you at all; you will be welcomed."

I apologized, and replied: "I am from Toronto, Canada, and there are parts of that city I would not want to walk alone as dark was settling in – that's why I asked the question; I did not mean to imply this was an unsafe city. I am sorry if my question offended you."

So off I went, and as I can do when in my absent-minded tourist mode, walked along the business district checking out the buildings, and then oversaw the demolition and rebuilding of a stretch of buildings, and then realized I am next to an empty series of lots a block past the busy downtown area.

Quickly I cross the street and returned to the business district when I came across a group of young men standing on the sidewalk, seemingly seeking no harm, but also clearly with time on their hands. Not wanting to confront them, I stepped down off the curb and started walking along the side of the road when they turned and stepped off the curb as well.

Suddenly all of the warnings that had come my way filtered into my brain, warnings about being safe and not doing anything foolish, so I stopped to plan my next move, when one of the men clearly signalled to me to go up on the sidewalk and pass them by. They had stepped off the sidewalk at the same time I had because they were clearly making a path for this guest of their city and country to walk unencumbered down the street.

I wondered how many 20 somethings – how many people period – would step off the sidewalk in Canada to give a clear path to a guest from a foreign land? What I thought was happening was not what was happening.

The obvious is not always so obvious.

And so today we have the story of Greeks coming to Jesus and asking to speak to him.

They were foreigners – they might be plotting a scheme to harm Jesus, we would assume today. They may want to ridicule this person known as a religious leader.

No, you see everything today gets interpreted as a conspiracy in our culture – these Greeks probably simply had some basic interest in what Jesus had to say, and wanted to be connected to him in a respectful, personal way.

What is obvious is not always so obvious.

Many years ago I was confronted by a local member of the United Church I then served, although he grew up as an Anglican. I knew him well because while his attendance was sporadic, his wife attended the United Church regularly. It was the fall of 1988, and the United Church had just decided to allow all people who were members of the United Church, regardless of their sexual orientation, to be eligible to be considered for ministry.

This fellow was strident in his views, and I expected set in his ways in many topics. I knew his views on the social economy, and assumed I knew his views on other topics.

When he came with a verbal “guns a blazing” to speak to me, I knew what he was about to say. Or so I thought.

He recaptured decisions of the General Council that summer, and asked a rhetorical question (for he knew the answer):

“And does this mean that Forest United Church could call a gay minister for the pulpit in this community?”

Not wanting to deceive, I said: “Yes, it does.”

Before I could say any more, he began:

“Well, you may think they could do that but I know this community, and there is no way this church will ever hire a gay minister in my lifetime. And that is my concern,” he continued.

“My son is gay, and if there is no room for him in the United Church, then there is no room for me.”

The obvious is not always so obvious.

As we enter into our annual meetings for the church and the Place, we might assume we are entering into a dialogue that has a predictable process and already known outcomes.

We may be right.

But the best meetings I ever had attended are meetings where the discussion is rich, the outcomes not scripted, and the decision making process has been engaging and challenging.

It may be obvious what is about to take place as we gather together – or it may not be so obvious.

We can be open to the breezes of the spirit in our midst, and the pull on our heartstrings of the needs around us, and be transformed into new life.

And new life is always a good thing – even in Lent.

We need not fear that the obvious is not always so obvious.