

O Canada, eh!

A Canada Day Sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, July 2nd, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 10:40-42

Denied asylum in the US, Seidu Mohammed feared being deported to his native Ghana where he'd be killed or jailed because he's a homosexual. He met Razak Iyal, also a Ghanaian national, at a bus terminal in Minneapolis. Both men had been denied asylum. Worried about deportation, they took a bus to Grand Forks, North Dakota, where they set out in brutal winter conditions, heading for Manitoba to cross illegally into Canada.

Mohammed and his friend both lost all their fingers to frostbite after a 10-hour trek across fields of waist-high snow in sub-zero temperatures. Despite their injuries, the two men say they now feel safe in Winnipeg. They're part of a growing number of immigrants risking the northern border crossing. "God blessed Canada with good people," said Mohammed. "I see the difference between Canada and other nations." A local official asked: "How can we help?" "What can we do?" And through an interpreter he said, "Just be nicer. Don't treat us like we're horrible. Be kind."

How is that cold cup of kindness a meaningful extension of hospitality? In spiritual terms, that gesture takes seriously the instructions Jesus gives to the disciples: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." American writer Yvette Flunder states, *"...oppressive theology, or a theology that welcomes those who fit a normative definition of the dominant culture while excluding those who do not, is a ball and chain on the heart of the body of Christ, and with it we keep each other in bondage"*. Now we start to see why hospitality is crucial to the Gospel, why it's essential to the kingdom of God. See, when Jesus liberates us from having to distinguish between who is deserving in our judgment and who is not, the shackles of partiality are loosed so that we can freely offer more and more of those simple acts of kindness to all of God's little ones.

Jesus says that extending kindness to any human being, welcoming any member of what the poet Maya Angelou beautifully terms "The Human Family," especially those who are among our society's most vulnerable outcasts, is to welcome Jesus and thereby to welcome the Divine.

A rookie minister visited with a veteran minister of many years. The 'rookie' mentions the vagrants who come by his church seeking help. He says to his elder, "I know we're supposed to help the poor, but these people are asking for help with a bus ticket or a utility bill or gas money or food. Is that really their story? The last thing they're likely to spend that money on is the bus ticket or the utility bill or the gas tank or food. They'll probably spend it on something the Church doesn't support, something that I certainly don't support." Finally, the young minister says, "It gets exhausting justifying who I'm going to help and why." The 'Veteran' sits back and lets the young guy's words loom in the air like a confession waiting for assurance. Then the older guy says, "What business is it of yours determining who gets help and who doesn't? Why exhaust yourself with that burden? You are a follower of Jesus. Your task, therefore, is simply to share out of the wealth of God's abundance. Your requirement is simply to love others as God loves you. Your job is simply to give."

Hospitality frees us to offer a cup of cold water to someone who might be in a situation completely foreign to our experience; someone in a world that is outside our limited understanding. And when we are brought into relationship with one another by the bond that hospitality creates, there is no more host and guest, no more insider and outsider; there is only a space in which we listen to and learn from one another, value and honour one another until all the uneven ground on which we stood becomes level, and the rough places are made a plain.

In a congregation I served in Toronto's west-end we had an outreach ministry to street people by providing a full balanced evening meal on Sunday evenings to anyone who came to our doors. One hot, humid summer Sunday evening I enjoyed a dinner with a family of four: a single mom with two children and a teenager. The mom worked most evenings as a cab driver. We got to talking about Summer Holidays, and how they would like to spend them. She said, "I'd go to a beach somewhere; doesn't matter where. And I'd want my babies right there with me." I said, "That sounds great except for the part about having my kids there every waking moment." With my foot planted firmly in my mouth, I continued, "A vacation like that would be great, but it would be better if you had an occasional timeout from the kids. I mean, they are with you all the time." The mom looked at me with raised eyebrows and said, "That's my reality every day. Mister, you need to change your perspective." She, of course, was right.

Jesus speaks about how when we welcomed the least of these who are members of his family, we in fact welcomed him. And perhaps by practicing hospitality, we would be ushered into a mutual space where all of us little ones realize that each of us is loved equally by God, and that each of us is crucial to God's kingdom of forgiveness and healing, justice and mercy, righteousness and hope on earth as it is in heaven.

We are blessed to live in this great Nation. While there is no core identity, no mainstream as such in Canada, there are ***shared values*** — *openness to the realities of our world, respect for all people, compassion, a willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, and to search for equality and justice for all*. Those are the qualities in which we, as Canadians, take great pride.

A proud moment came to me this past winter while watching the news at the close of the day. There for all to see was a scene etched forever, I hope, in my mind, of RCMP officers, law enforcement assisting a Syrian refugee family (Mom, Dad, and three children), struggling with wind, snow and sub-zero cold, shabbily dressed, desperate now just to stay alive, to illegally cross the US/Canadian Border into Quebec. And I thought, "This is what makes Canada different from most all countries in the world, where our police who are supposed to know how to uphold the law and also know when to turn the other way allowing our common humanity to trump our legalism."

And you know what? Sitting there in the den in my comfortable chair just for a moment I think I saw God smiling on those police officers.

"O Canada, we stand on guard for thee."