

**Sermon: July 2, 2017 – Canada 150 – Matthew 10: 40-42  
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore - Rev. Greg Wooley**

On this weekend, we mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Confederation. If we think back 50 years, to the Centennial year, many of us – me included – can recall the excitement. The Centennial version of the Maple Leaf was everywhere, Bobby Gimby's ubiquitous "Ca-na-da" was ringing in our ears, Expo 67 invited the world to a festival of nations and a futuristic display of great optimism. Even the Montreal Canadiens and Toronto Maple Leafs managed to get in on it, playing in the Stanley Cup final, won by the Leafs. (As an aside, the Leafs have made it known that they plan to win the cup again in 2067 to mark Canada's bicentennial, but probably not before).

If we imagine what things were like 100 years ago, in 1917, we would be stepping into a nation at war, and the ways that fifty-year-old Canada was just beginning to see itself as separate from its French-British roots. At the same time, we were struggling with what to do with those whose roots were on the other side of the war, with thousands of people of German, Ukrainian and Eastern European extraction forced into internment camps.

If we had the ability to travel all the way back to 1867, we would see a sparsely populated, largely agricultural Canada comprised of only four provinces, with Manitoba, PEI and BC ready to join soon. Much of the west was either within the Northwest Territories or Rupert's Land, and treaty signing would not begin for another four years.

At each of these stopping points, we see a different cultural makeup of the land. Back in 1867, the west, in particular, was primarily inhabited by the first nations, with a few forts and trading posts dotting the land. Most of the European-descended 1867 population would trace their roots to France or the British Isles. By 1917, more widespread European migration had happened, with young men and entire families coming to places like Canmore from countries like Finland and Italy to work in the mines or forests, to establish farms, to establish businesses. By 1967, to borrow words from Bobby Gimby, "now we [were] twen-ty mil-li-on" – and the face of Canada was now 75% urban, rather than the 80% rural that had been 100 years earlier, and some of the small-town values and institutions that had defined Canadian culture were up for negotiation. And today, the face of Canada is growing more diverse each day, with cities like Calgary having roughly 30% of its population made up of visible minorities.

A few minutes ago, I asked you to think of a story about when your family came to Canada, or when you welcomed someone to Canada. I'd like you to turn to the person beside you and share that story. We'll take three minutes for this (and I'll watch the time, ringing the chime when we're half way through) – and just to remind us of the questions, for those of you who can remember coming here, or whose parents or grandparents told you stories of arrival, I'd like you to focus on how hospitality was shown, or not shown, to you or your family; and for those of you whose roots have been in Canadian soil for a long, long time, I'd like you to think of a specific time when you were the one who had the task of making a new Canadian feel at home, and how that went...

I suspect that within this room, this exercise of thinking about the changing face of Canada, and how welcome is extended, has elicited a variety of response. Some will be excited by the growing diversity, the expanded range of cultures and customs and languages that are now part of the Canadian mosaic; some may be longing for the days when things were less urban, less culturally diverse, perhaps even less affluent and therefore more neighbourly; and for others, this might be a very pensive question, as you reflect on how all of us newcomers have related to the first peoples of this land. You see, hospitality is a wonderful thing but it is not always easy, and can, in fact, be very, very messy. To extend hospitality to another is to change one's personal context, and whenever we are in the midst of change we experience both the loss of how things used to be, and the maybe-exciting, maybe-scary possibilities of how things are potentially going to be. As people who are sometimes in a position to extend hospitality, and are sometimes in a position where we need to be embraced by the hospitality of others, we experience a social dynamic that connects us with our story of faith.

In the days and environs of Jesus, hospitality was a crucial element of society. As stated by the Jewish Virtual Library, "In ancient Israel, hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and nomadic existence led by the people of Israel. Biblical law specifically sanctified hospitality toward the 'stranger' who was to be made particularly welcome 'for

you were strangers in a strange land' (Lev. 19:34 and Ex. 12:49)." Who you invited into your home, who you invited to share your table, which passers-by could count on you for a drink of water on a hot, thirsty day, defined who you were in relationship to others, and in relationship to God.

The giving and receiving of hospitality was of key importance to the lives of the first disciples. From its first word to its last word, the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew is full of instructions from Jesus to the twelve, equipping them for life on the road and in particular, preparing them for the kind of Hospitality that could be expected. The disciples are told that they are to completely rely on hospitality, not bringing extra clothes or money along with them, or accepting pocket money from their hosts (verses 8-10); even as they receive hospitality, they are to honour their hosts by bringing blessings to their house (verses 12-13); and they are warned that those being visited might not be warm to their message of Christ's promised new realm, using the now-familiar words, "if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." (verse 14, RSV). The instructions conclude with the brief passage we heard today, words that summarize what is to be given by those who welcome, and what they will receive from those who are welcomed.

As with our personal stories of hospitality, and our reflections on Canada 150, these words from Matthew call us to really dig deep into our experiences of either being welcomed or not welcomed, and our experiences of either extending or withholding hospitality from others. Verses 40 to 42 are fairly dense material, and somewhat unclear as to whether Jesus has switched gears and is now talking to settled people about offering hospitality, or if he is still preparing his disciples for life on the road, but what does come clear, is that the expression of true hospitality is more than providing a meal or a resting place. True hospitality involves an exchange: as we make ourselves vulnerable to others, we not only give them the food or shelter or friendship that they need, but we open ourselves to receive from them their wisdom, and the fullness of what he or she wants to share. Sometimes this gift will be something we want, sometimes we would be just as happy to keep our distance, but to be hospitable includes giving room for them to say what they need to say, and be who they need to be, and perhaps to change who we are. So, says Jesus, if one welcomes a prophet, one welcomes their message; if one welcomes someone who lives a righteous life, one welcomes that righteousness; but if one welcomes someone in need, offering something as small as a cup of cold water, one will receive not only whatever it is that this "little one" brings, but also the gratitude of Christ himself, for those little gifts of hospitality offered at just the right time can be life-changers. We share what we have to share, but we also open ourselves to be changed by the guest – we open our homes and we open our hearts.

At this moment, in this place, what does this all mean for us?

As Canadians, and as Christians in Canada, we have lots to think of at year 150. We can look with pride at the way that this nation – and this congregation – has taken leadership in welcoming refugees, offering the safety of our nation and our openness to learn from these newcomers. And we are working at ways to extend full hospitality to even more people. We have started a formal time of study, known as the "affirming process," in which we will learn with our heads and our hearts what it would take, and what it would mean, to be more overtly accepting of the LGBTQ community – and we've started some reach-out to that population already. We have received information from the Bow Valley Immigration Partnership about the friendship needs of those who have come from the Philippines and other lands to work here in Canmore and Banff, what would be entailed in expressing hospitality to those folks. In our Children's Church program we wish, not only to assist with the faith development of the children, but to extend hospitality for their parents, so that they can remain in the worship service while others of us are interacting with their children. Caylee LaBranche is doing excellent work on our behalf this summer, with the Youth and Young Adult population of Canmore and environs, so that we as a congregation and Canmore as a town can see what gaps there might be for that age group and what, if anything, we are called to do in response. We also continue the hard work of seeking reconciliation with our aboriginal sisters and brothers, a new relationship built on respect and Christ's own hospitality. All of these are expressions of hospitality that we have been called to, and I am so pleased at the ways that this call is being answered.

In the same way that the first twelve disciples of Jesus were challenged to leave the safety of the group and bring the good news to other communities, we, too, are called to embrace the uncertainty that comes with change. We are called to be so open to those folks who have not yet walked through the door, that

we not just teach them how Church culture works, but that we allow ourselves to be changed by them as we and they learn together what it means to be the Church in our time and place. And at times, we may even be called to be those who are “on the road” in the name of Jesus, showing a world that is increasingly skeptical of religious life, that being a person of faith can open us to fairness, and tolerance, and hospitality.

At one and the same time, in our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, as Canadians at this time of reflection and celebration, we are the ones who welcome to this community and the ones who are welcomed to this community, we are the hosts to this land and we are the guests on this land, we are the seekers after Christ and we are the evangelists on his behalf; and in all of it, we are those whose lives are given their meaning by the risen one whose words and deeds of inclusion and invitation bring light and hope to all. For this glorious, messy mixture we call hospitality in the name of Jesus, for the beauty and bounty of this land we humbly share, we give thanks to our gracious and generous God. Amen.

Sources cited:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hospitality>

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo62a-eng.htm>

For further reading:

Davis, Mark. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2014/06/welcoming-and-watering.html>

Lose, David. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3265>

© 2017, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church