

Sermon: Aboriginal Sunday, July 26, 2016 – 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley

Each of us has a deep-seated need to belong. As newborns we look up into our Mother's eyes and need her smile and her embrace; as children we need to have other children we can name as friends; as teenagers we desperately need a place where we fit in; as adults we seek places where we can contribute to society, and places where we can be authentically ourselves. At each stage of growth, we need a sense of belonging within something bigger than ourselves.

Early Christ-followers in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth had a hard time knowing where they fit in. In 1 Corinthians 11: 17-22, one chapter before today's readings, Paul has these extremely blunt words for them: "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings [i.e. worship gatherings] do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you...as you eat [the Lord's Supper] each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you?"

Can't you just hear the exasperation in his voice? In other cities around the Mediterranean, gathering in Christ's name was an amazing, counter-cultural get-together where women and men, slaves and free could get together as equals and share the Words of Christ and the Bread and Cup of reconciling love. Meanwhile, in Corinth it was all about underlining and amplifying the status of the individual. If you were poor and/or unlearned you were humbled in Church, too. If you were rich and/or forceful you got your way in Church, too. And to top it off, if someone exhibited Spiritual gifts within the Corinthian Church, that was a huge status symbol for that person rather than a gift to edify the community.

Into this total schmozzle of a local Church that had completely lost its way, Paul unrolls his extended metaphor of the Church as one body. His introduction and conclusion really say it all: "the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body.... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." (1 Cor 12: 12, 26).

So here we have one understanding of belonging and interrelatedness: in Christ we are not "members" in the way that members of an organization can choose to renew that membership or let it lapse, but rather we are members of one body, as integral and connected as the hands and feet and eyes and ears in Paul's rather lengthy analogy. Our belonging to this body of Christ is organic, permanent, and complete.

This morning, I'd like to place beside Paul's words another understanding of belonging which, to me, builds on what Paul has said. It's the concept of "ALL MY RELATIONS" which finds expression in a wide range of first nations spiritualities. Or I guess "concept" is the wrong word, because ALL MY RELATIONS is not primarily a mental construct, it's a way of living, a way of being, a way of walking gently within creation. And, since 2012, they are words that have been on our United Church Crest, in the Mohawk phrase "Akwe Nia Tetewá neren."

In Indigenous Religious gatherings you will often hear the words ALL MY RELATIONS, sometimes as a sort of call to worship but more often, where we might say "Amen" in a Christian prayer. It reminds us of the breadth of our context at any given point, and respects and even invokes the Spirits contained within our surroundings.

To me, whenever I hear the words, ALL MY RELATIONS, the words call to an aching need in my soul, and I'll tell you why. For decades now, I have struggled with the notion of "home," that one physical place that holds me and nurtures me, the place I can return to and always be "at one" with. When I was four years old our little family of Mom, Dad, my older brother and yours truly moved from Ontario, where ALL our family supports were, to Regina. And while our family of four did pretty well, we were a long way from "all OUR relations". In summertime, we would often go back to Sault Ste. Marie and would be immersed in broader family life for a few weeks, and helped me understand a bit of what I was missing by being so far away from my kinfolk.

That is likely something that many of us here can identify with, to an extent at least. One thing I realized about this congregation a little while ago, is that because most of us have come from someplace else, in most instances I don't know your siblings, or your children, or your cousins or aunts or uncles or nieces or nephews. That is so different from other towns I've lived in, where you could barely keep track of all the

family connections, and where part of your understanding of an individual came from what you knew of their broader family. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing that I don't know your brothers and your sisters, but part of our social context here is that I don't know "all your relations."

The book *Indigenous Healing* by Rupert Ross, one of the books being read as part of this summer's "right relations reading circle" here at Ralph Connor, tells us this (p.9): within indigenous cultures, and indeed in the vast majority of cultures around the world, "Relationships [are] what make, direct, unmake, damage and reward us. You can't know me without knowing something of my relationships." While those of us from an Anglo-Saxon background love the orderliness of following the rules, that's not what makes most of the world go 'round. In much of the world, and most definitely within traditional cultures in this land, life and health and aspirations and even possessions are not primarily personal; all of those things are held communally. My needs and yours are intertwined, my happiness and yours are intertwined, in almost exactly the way that the apostle Paul hoped for in his impassioned plea to the Corinthians: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." (1 Cor 12: 26).

So, that's the first thing I gain if I apply the concept of ALL MY RELATIONS to this exploration of our need for belonging: I gain a realization of how different things look if we are next door to our kinfolk rather than scattered around the world, and more than that, how different life is if it is governed more by interdependence than by independence. But that's just the first step.

I mentioned that from my isolated little family unit in Regina, it was important to reconnect with the broader family back in Ontario. And while that was true, there was still something missing. Those were my people, but that wasn't my place. My brother was born there, my Mom grew up just east of there, but I'd never lived in Sault Ste. Marie at any point in my life. It wasn't until I took my one and only trip to Scotland, and visited Glencoe where hundreds of my MacDonald ancestors had been slaughtered some 300 years earlier, that felt that next stage of what it meant to be HOME. On the bridge at Glencoe I was one with the land and the land was one with me. I was one with my ancestors and they were one with me. It was, to use Celtic terminology, a truly "thin" place where earth and heaven basically met; and while I didn't have the language at that time, it was also a place where the next level of ALL MY RELATIONS became real.

Gregory Cajete, an author from the Tewa nation in New Mexico, puts it this way: (Ross, p.45) "all Indigenous tribes – their philosophies, cultural ways of life, customs, language – are ultimately tied to the relationships that they have established and applied...with regard to certain places and to the earth as a whole....Native people interacted with the places in which they lived, for such a long time that their landscapes became reflections of their very souls." So the living out of ALL MY RELATIONS is not just sharing at a deep, supportive level with your aunts and your grandchildren, it embraces a deep spiritual connection with your surroundings – much in the way that God and the twelve tribes of Israel and the idea of a "promised land" has been so central to our Jewish forebears' self-understanding.

Indeed, Chief John Snow made this very point some 40 years ago in his book, *These Mountains are our Sacred Places*. This was one of three books I read in the early 1980s that first opened my eyes to Aboriginal history and spirituality and remains an important source for me. He wrote (p.6, 2-3 "Our philosophy of life sees the Great Spirit's creation as a whole piece.... It is not enough to say that the Mountains were the Stoney's' traditional place of prayer because...religion, and reverence for nature, which revealed religious truth was woven throughout all parts of the social structure and observed in conjunction with every activity.....[In our traditional ways], everywhere the spirits of all living things were alive. We talked to the rocks, the streams, the trees, the plants, the herbs, and all nature's creations. We called the animals our brothers...and at times [these brothers] revealed important events or visited us on our vision quests to the mountain tops. Truly, we were part of and related to the universe, and these animals were a very special part of the Great Spirit's creation." And in the very rocks themselves, we sense the presence of the ancestors.

While the notion of ALL MY RELATIONS including mountains and rocks and streams and all God's creatures may initially sound a bit out-there to those of us who grew up with strict Christian understandings, my mind goes quickly back to my favourite children's hymn of all, "This is my Father's world" and its unforgettable line, "In the rustling grass I hear him pass, He speaks to me everywhere." Many of us have that relationship with God and nature, in fact that's what brought many of us to live in this beautiful part of the world. We do experience the fullness of God's magnificent love when we look at

the intricacies of her creation: the perfection of tiny wildflowers, the thrill at watching a chick hatch from its shell, all set to the backdrop of a mountain sentinel whose size and strength and permanence are nothing short of breathtaking. When I take that experience – of being thrilled by creation as I visit with her – and then imagine what it would be like if this was *my* ancestral home, I start to understand even more of what ALL MY RELATIONS is all about.

When I sense that I belong, deeply, in my surrounding; when I am truly at home – with the people around me, with the woodland creatures around me, with the land that supports me and the mountains that stand witness to all of it – then there is a sense of sacredness to life: all of life, not just some of it. When I live in this holistic manner, I see myself not as the overlord of creation but in a new way, as described by Rupert Ross (p.7): “Within this reverse hierarchy, human creatures are understood to be the least essential and the most dependent. No longer masters of creation, we are its humble servants instead.”

As someone who has moved around a lot and has but a superficial relationship to the land I live on in any given moment, I cannot describe to you what a gift I receive in the worldview described by ALL MY RELATIONS. I also realize what a privilege it is to live on land that has meant so much to its indigenous population. It gives me one more reason to want to build that relationship between Canmore and Morley, between our Christian understandings and the wisdom of Stoney elders. It underlines the importance of speaking and acting when we sense that the needs of our relatives, the Elk and the Bears and the Wolves are not being protected. It reinforces the sense of sacredness that I always feel within these four walls, as I understand this as a holy space within a whole realm of holy space, all of which I am related to because all of it emanates from one Creator, the God of the Ages.

As we acknowledged two weeks ago, 2016 is the thirtieth anniversary of the United Church of Canada's apology to First Nations' peoples. The resource materials for that anniversary asked us to keep that acknowledgement and lament separate from Aboriginal Sunday, reminding us that Aboriginal Sunday is a time of celebration, a time to acknowledge the gifts of Indigenous religious traditions to our common understanding of God, our loving Creator. That was such a helpful request because, to be honest, in recent years I have become so caught up in the brokenness of relationship between First Nations and colonizers that I neglect the gifts of spirit that are here. The process of Truth and Reconciliation is important and is going to take a long time, but we must celebrate one another's gifts even as we work out what the next phase of the relationship between our people is going to look like.

And so today we celebrate the gift of belonging that is offered to us. We give thanks to our participation in the body of Christ as diverse members of one body. We give thanks to God, Creator of heaven and earth, for that great cloud of witnesses we call ALL MY RELATIONS, the land and the rivers, the fish and the birds, the four-legged creatures and us two-legged creatures. We give thanks for the sense of belonging that has been so central to this congregation through its first 125 years, and all that God will place before us in the years to come. In all of it, we give thanks that we do belong, because all of us and all that we see around us, are in the loving hands of the eternal God.

ALL MY RELATIONS. AMEN.

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