

Sermon: May 16, 2021 – Psalm 1

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

You are like a tree, planted by *flowing, cool* streams of water *that never run dry*. Your fruit ripens in its time; your leaves never fade or curl *in the summer sun*. (Psalm 1:3, *The Voice* translation)

Watch: <https://youtu.be/QHHf0GMZ5JU>

Today's scripture reading, Psalm 1, presents us with this beautiful mental picture of a tree planted by flowing waters. It contrasts those who choose to be nourished by God's refreshing waters— those planted or, in some translations, "transplanted" so that they can live their lives by these healthy streams— with those who choose more selfish locales. Richard Rohr (p.70) writes about how it feels to be "in the flow" – our ability to recognize the current of the Holy Spirit running in us and between us around us – and that also comes to mind when imagining these trees planted by flowing waters. We know how it feels to be in a positive flow, and we resemble those fortunately located trees when we are in a place with holy, healthy flow.

Having named this experience, and having been given this beautiful image by the Psalmist, I just want to sit and enjoy this for a few moments. So let's do that: imagine yourself by cool, flowing water, renewed by the grace of a loving God... (accompanied by a few seconds of a burbling mountain stream)... it is good to feel "in the flow", to feel that one's heart and mind and spirit are in a harmonious relationship with God's holy, sacred rhythm. But the Psalm also reminds us of our responsibilities in all this: in order to have a healthy, fruitful life, we will not just be lounging in comfort and ease, but will open ourselves to be fed and motivated by God's loving agenda that reaches out to all living beings, beginning with the most vulnerable. We will know we are in God's holy flow not only by feeling balanced and well-aligned, but by engaging in actions that make us attuned to and involved in God's never-ending pursuit of justice.

As I view this Psalm once more, then, not just as an idyllic picture of nature, but as a call to stop and assess, I wonder: in what ways have I and we chosen to follow the flow of peace and justice for all people and all of creation? And in what ways might I and we default to easier ways, placid but stagnant, that allow things to stay as they are, enjoying the benefits of the status quo without seeking any alterations or upsets?

Last fall, the United Church, through our General Council, has committed us to becoming an anti-racist denomination. As a national entity – and as a call to all local communities of faith - we have made a commitment to be, not just a place opposed to violent racism and blatant discrimination, but to be full-on anti-racist. We're called to look at the way things are, to acknowledge that white privilege does hold sway here, and to recalibrate (and in some cases, dismantle) our beliefs and words and attitudes and decisions and structures. We have decided to be ANTI something, and the thing we are against, within us and around us, is racism.

That is going to be an ongoing process for a long time, methinks, so as a first response I'll try to do two things this morning: define one key term, and set some context. The first thing, is to define what racism is. I hear the word racist, and my mind immediately leaps to extremists wearing white hoods or Neo-Nazi armbands. And yes, those nasty,

easily-identified expressions of racist ideology are to be opposed swiftly and vigorously. But the work we are being called to do starts way before that.

Two books that I've found helpful on this topic, are *WHITE FRAGILITY* by Robin DiAngelo, and *ME AND WHITE SUPREMACY* by Layla F. Saad. I suspect that you have other titles you have found helpful and if so, please email me and I'll add them to our list of potential book-study candidates. A quote from Layla Saad helps to address one of the first questions that comes along when defining what racism means; that is, the difference between racism, and prejudice:

"All people, regardless of race, can hold some level of prejudice toward people who are not the same race as them. A person of any race can prejudge a person of any other race based on negative racial stereotypes and other factors. Prejudice is wrong, but it is not the same as racism. Racism is the coupling of prejudice with power, where the dominant racial group (which in a white supremacist society is people with white privilege) is able to dominate over all other racial groups and negatively affect those racial groups at all levels – personally, systemically, and institutionally." (p.107)

In its most basic formulation, then, "Racism is the coupling of prejudice with power" – and while I don't perceive the Church as being a particularly powerful institution in 2021, certainly not in the way it was 60 years ago or a century ago, we do as Church have personal, and systemic, and institutional practices tilted in favour of the majority. And, like it or not, we do have some voice in the communities around us. Now, when we're selecting delegates to certain meetings, we do work to make sure that a wide range of people will see themselves being represented, and we've had a reasonably diverse group of people serve as Moderator over the past three decades, but those visible changes mask invisible changes that have not yet been addressed. It will take prolonged, deep soul-searching for us to name and change attitudes and structures that make it a lot easier for some of us to roam freely through Church and community life, while others are repeatedly reminded of their "other-ness."

The second thing I want to lift up today, is that this overt call to become a non-racist denomination, is not something brand-new but is rather a "next step" in a long-standing process. Adele Halliday, the Anti-Racism and Equity Officer of the United Church of Canada, outlines the more recent steps in this way: {watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcD8pRb71kA> from 2.57 to 5.34; these steps are detailed in the addendum, below}

The present initiative, then, is intertwined with steps already taken since 1986 toward Living into Right Relations, and becoming an inter-cultural Church, and a previous anti-racism policy established in 2000. Elsewhere in the video, Adele also acknowledges that the sharp societal focus in the year 2020 on the specific dangers faced on a daily basis by Black people in Canada and the USA was a significant spur in taking this next step. She touches on other social justice work that we are working on as Church, such as the Affirming process, as also being aligned with anti-racism. And while it was not within the scope of Adele's video, we cannot enter into the work of anti-racism without recalling the reckoning at the end of the 2018 United Church General Council. In the very final session of General Council 43, the Church was taken to task as speaker after speaker, people who identify as Black, Indigenous or People of Colour, as well as

people with disabilities, coming to the microphones to tell their stories of being excluded by the Church. This week's Ralph Connor Newsletter has links to a video that replays that difficult but pivotal moment for The United Church of Canada. (see below)

A word that kept coming up in Adele's recalling of the process-thus-far, is "becoming." Much like any process of learning and change, we acknowledge that racism continues to have significant power in both Church and society and we commit ourselves to become better than that. We identify where we are, and the gap between that place and the place that Christ calls us to be, and use that gap as a catalyst to become people who live by the principles of invitation, participation and justice, laid before us by Jesus. There will be times of confession in this process and I can pretty much guarantee that there will be moments of embarrassment, at the depth to which we as Church continue to participate, unconsciously and consciously, in racist ways of being. But there is also support and perhaps even momentum to be found, as we consider the work that has already been taking place – the commitments already made – the journeys currently undertaken.

In closing, Pastor Minoo W. Kim brings us back to the 1st Psalm with these words: "As if we are trees planted by streams of water, we respond to God's loving grace by stretching our roots toward living water. As if we are trees planted by streams of water, we joyfully harness these streams of the Spirit made available to us. As if we are trees, we constantly push our roots toward the source of life." I appreciate this image that reminds me of a natural striving towards life-giving water and nutrients. As we as a denomination, as local communities of faith, and as individuals, investigate the place of racism within us, I urge you to think of it not as an interruption to the easy-going ways of the Spirit, but as an invitation to the dynamic flow of the Spirit. It is in seeking justice that we reach into God's loving flow. May that powerful Spirit encourage and entice and embolden us in that journey toward faithfulness, that process of becoming. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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References cited:

DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility*. Boston: Beacon, 2018.

Halliday, Adele. "EDGY Conversations - Becoming an Anti-Racist Denomination" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcD8pRb71kA>

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The United Church of Canada. "About Anti-Racism". <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/anti-racism/about-anti-racism>

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see especially sections beginning at 1:52:36 and 3:42:28.

Addendum: steps taken by the United Church of Canada toward becoming an Anti-Racist denomination, since 1986

1986: apology to Indigenous Peoples

1998: apology to former students of Residential Schools

2000: Anti-Racism Policy, with 4 key areas of work

1. Participate fully.
2. Organize for diversity.
3. Act justly.
4. Speak to the world.

2006: commitment to become an Inter-Cultural Church

2012: six-part Intercultural vision

1. Welcoming
2. Relational
3. Adaptive
4. Justice-seeking
5. Intentional
6. missional

2016: adopted the principles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as a framework for Reconciliation

2017: CareTakers' report (Indigenous calls to the Church)

2020: commitment to become an Anti-Racist Denomination