

Sermon: Affirming Ministry Sunday, October 29, 2023

Genesis 9: 12-17 and Galatians 3: 26-29

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

Revisiting Canmore's Affirming Ministry Celebration on October 27, 2019

– and Banff's Affirming Ministry Celebration on October 4, 2020

As I prepared for this day of celebration, I was brought back, not only to the Sunday four years ago when this Church building was bedecked with rainbows, but also to some of the theological underpinnings of being an Affirming Ministry. With that in mind, today's message repeats and revisits much of what I spoke on that day:

We know, when we look to the sky, where rainbows come from: they come from water droplets, typically after a rain, interacting with sunshine. Good old Wikipedia has this succinct definition: "A rainbow is a meteorological phenomenon that is caused by reflection, refraction and dispersion of light in water droplets resulting in a spectrum of light appearing in the sky." Yet even with that knowledge of the science behind it all, no matter how many times we've seen rainbows, they surprise and thrill us and make us want to share the joy, even with total strangers, when we see a rainbow appear.

No wonder, then, that many cultures have looked to the sky at these wonderful, fleeting expressions of colour, and discerned within them a symbolic representation of diversity, and some form of Divine presence. We look to the rainbow as nature's declaration that the world God gives is not just greyscale, but filled with colour. And not just red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet, but the range within those colours. As a child I loved colouring with my Laurentien pencil crayons, and in the full set there were no fewer than eleven shades of green, ranging from "moss green" to "emerald" to my favourite, that nearly-black shade called "deep chrome green"; and for graphic designers using the Pantone colour system, there are around 300 hues of green. The world of colour is an amazing thing, and those most attuned to earth's diversity, appreciative of the breadth of species and the range of human experience, are those who get the most from the gift of life.

Within our faith tradition, the rainbow has another significance. As our ancestors in the faith wondered about the origins of the world they lived in, a mythology developed, which we take as second-nature: creation in six days, with the seventh day a day of rest; Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, Noah and the great flood. These stories, with the miraculous intertwined with the murderous, attempted to shed some light on the gap between the life-giving, harmonious intentions of God and the ego-driven, divisive ways of humanity.

The story of the rainbow, in the book of Genesis, comes after the waters recede from the great flood, and Noah's family and the full range of species re-start the story of life. God – pictured in very masculine terms in this story – takes his bow (think, bow & arrow) and hangs it in the sky, never to be used again. Every time, then we see a rainbow in the sky, it is to remind us of God's promise to withhold anger. Within Jewish practice there remains a tradition of saying a silent prayer when seeing a rainbow, "Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who remembers the covenant, and is faithful to His covenant, and keeps His promise."

Remembering this Biblical understanding of the rainbow, as we celebrate our identity as an Affirming Community of Faith, is to remind us that if our picture of God is angry and domineering, then we've got the wrong picture. This legend of God's war-bow being hung up in the clouds, never to be used again, is thousands of years old, yet in 2023 we still hear the name of God attached to angry denunciations: of the LGBTQ community, particularly the

Trans and Non-Binary, or anyone else who gets perceived as “different”. We’ve had over three thousand years to figure it out, not to mention the entire story of Jesus Christ and his embodied expression of God’s boundless love. It makes me wonder how long will it take, and what further evidence is needed, to finally let go of this notion of a God motivated by anger, and judgment, whose approval of a person is conditional?

My hope, as we think back – three years in Banff, four in Canmore – to those celebration days when we were surrounded by rainbows, is that the world will one day be freed from all vestiges of this angry-God theology, replaced by a truly Biblical image of a God of acceptance, a God of unbounded, universal love. In the words of Fr. Richard Rohr (p.29), “Faith at its essential core is accepting that you are accepted! We cannot deeply know ourselves without also knowing the One who made us, and we cannot fully accept ourselves without accepting God’s radical acceptance of every part of us”. What an amazing, affirming concept: the God of all creation, the God who loves you and me and us deeply and desperately, infuses loving intention into all the universe. The rainbow reminds us, that love, not anger, rules the day, even as it reminds us that all human experience – ALL human experience– is cradled lovingly within God’s ever-present care.

Our second reading this morning, from the letter to the Galatians, assesses this broad-spectrum love of God and brings it to the community level. In the early days of the Church, all manner of people, from vastly different classes and backgrounds, were coming together in the name of Christ Jesus. Questions were arising about how to handle this newly experienced diversity, and in answer Paul memorably wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) None of the categories that so easily divide us, none of the reasons why warheads are flying in and around Gaza these days, are points of division from God’s standpoint: not our ethnicity or religion, not our worldview or social status, not our gender or gender identity or sexual orientation. The apostle Paul knew that these differences exist and, in many cases, are important parts of how we see ourselves – but he is clear in stating God’s desire to break down hurtful divisions and hierarchies, rather than propping them up. In Christ, there are no second-class citizens, no advantages for the wealthy or to those deemed to be ‘pure of birth.’ The love shown in the life, deeds, words, and ongoing presence of Jesus Christ, is without boundary and beyond measure.

Seven months before our Affirming Celebration here in Canmore, Shannon and I attended The Universal Christ conference in Albuquerque, featuring, Richard Rohr, Jacqui Lewis and John Dominic Crossan. At the opening of that Conference, we were greeted with the beautiful words, “all of you are welcome here, and all of you is welcome here.” That, I hope, is what you are hearing in this time of worship and celebration, and in the ancient words of Genesis and Galatians. The God whose loving commitment to all the world is remembered each time we see a rainbow, loves you and every aspect of your being. The God whose love was so powerfully embodied in the person of Jesus, engages all that you embody, and loves you – and your neighbour – more fully than you or they could ask or imagine. As an Affirming Ministry, with two campuses in Canmore and Banff, we proclaim once more that all of you are welcome here, and all of you is welcome here, and we renew our commitment to Christ’s call to confront the injustices and inequities of the world, to affirm with our whole being the truth of God’s unconditional love in the face of all that tries to create winners and losers, approved and disapproved, entitled and disenfranchised.

When our two congregations amalgamated on January 1 of this year, the previous Mission statement of Rundle United Church became the Affirming Ministry statement of the

amalgamated faith community. These words speak of our understanding of God's inclusive love, and I now ask you, as you are able, to rise and repeat responsively the words of the Affirming Vision of Ralph Connor Memorial United Church:

As a community of faith on traditional Indigenous lands,

We strive to follow Christ's example in reaching out in love and friendship to all.

We are committed to full inclusion of people,

of any age, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, family structure, or personal circumstance, in all aspects of our life together.

We are called, in and with the larger community, to grow in faith,

through study, prayer, and service; to make known God's gracious presence; and to show loving concern to all Creation. Amen.

In the name of our loving, gracious God, the artist of rainbows, the author of inclusion, may these words continue to be that which we strive for. Amen!

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