

Reflection on the Word – July 1, 2018 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 12:28-34

Because this is Canada Day, I thought I'd start with a list of a few things that I love or celebrate about Canada:

1. There's the Natural Beauty of this country of ours ...
2. The Diversity of peoples –
3. And within that diversity many different cultures with their art, ceremony and dance
4. How about Canadian musicians? – Great Big Sea, Leonard Cohen, Jann Arden and so many more
5. Of course, we can't forget Hockey
6. Or our Loonie, Toonie and colourful bill currecncy
7. Then there's the RCMP, especially in their red serge
8. A medicare system that allows each of us access to health care
9. And the peace and freedoms we enjoy, won for us at great cost.

Indeed, there is a lot to celebrate and be thankful for in Canada. But, because we're in church, I guess I should focus on something with a little more spiritual depth. What might the scriptures we heard earlier say to us as we think about our life as citizens in this great country and as people of faith?

The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, conveys a message that might be summarized in the words, "Share and Share Alike". Paul praises those in the Corinthian church for their faith, their knowledge and wisdom. But the Corinthians, who had initially been eager to share what they had and collect an offering for those less fortunate, somehow had not completed the offering. And so Paul, commending them for their initial efforts, also encourages them to complete what they had begun a year earlier. He calls them to excel in their generosity and their practice of giving, to share from the abundance they have received, so that they might be an example to others.

This morning, I want to focus on a spirit of generosity as a quality that we ought to exemplify in our life together as Canadians, and certainly as people of the United Church of Canada.

And we might start with two theological principles. The first is that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it and we are the beneficiaries of God's grace and blessing. When you get right down to it, we really own nothing. We are simply caretakers or stewards of the things we enjoy for a short time. And after our years on earth are done, the things we have enjoyed will be left to be cared for by others. But while we live, we have a responsibility to exercise good stewardship, to leave the earth and all that is in it in good shape, so that those coming after us can also enjoy and benefit from that which God has provided.

The second theological principle is based on the example of Jesus' life - a life of self-giving love, forgiveness, of concern for all people, and especially those on the margins. The genuineness of our love for Christ and our commitment as disciples and followers of his way is seen in the love we demonstrate toward others ... through our giving and sharing in ways that make a difference - & through our commitment to justice-seeking, even at personal cost.

The apostle Paul speaks of a 'fair balance' between those who have abundance and those who are in need; between those who live with privilege and those who do not. He contends that it is only fair that those who have much would share with those who have little. It's the sentiment expressed in the words of great author, Leo Tolstoy, who wrote: "My piece of bread only belongs to me when I know that everyone else has a share and that no one starves while I eat."

Unfortunately, even in our own country, it appears that the gap between rich and poor is wide and growing wider. Despite efforts to eradicate child poverty, many children are still hungry, and many families, even in our local communities, are dependent on Food Banks and other charities to put food on the table. And in many countries around the world, the gap is even more pronounced. It's been said that we, as a society, as a nation, will certainly be judged for allowing those gaps between rich and poor to grow larger and larger. Because it

is in total contradiction to God's way of justice and right living.

How we will respond, how much we are willing to share, is something which all of us, as individuals, as churches, as nations must struggle and come to terms with. Along with the Corinthian Christians, we too are called upon to share what is fair out of the abundance that we have received. Unfortunately, there are many in our day and age who operate out of a sense of scarcity rather than abundance. There's always the fear that there won't be enough for me and my needs.

Over the last couple years, as Syrian refugees began arriving, seeking asylum, protection, and a better life, I heard a lot of people say: "We can't afford to provide for the needs of foreigners; we should look after our own first." And yet, if we were to trace our own ancestry, the majority of us came from a line of immigrants and foreigners who arrived in this land seeking a better life.

Somewhere I read these words: "If we wait to share until we find ourselves with surplus, we may never share because we have been subtly acculturated to think we never have enough ...we are sometimes blind as to how much we really have." Perhaps we need to hear again the words of Paul, calling us to excel in generous giving. And when we take time to honestly consider how blessed we are ... living in this community, and in this country of Canada, we

cannot help but be moved to a sense of gratitude which overflows into generous living.

Bill O'Brien, the editor of a religious magazine, tells the story of how a few years ago he went with a church group to China. On Sunday, individual members of the group fanned out and visited different churches in the city where they were staying. Marion, an older woman who was touring with the group, chose to visit a poor church composed of farmers.

Those farmers and their families who were at service that morning wanted to hear a word from their sister back in America. So Marion brought greetings from her church in Los Angeles and spoke of how they were currently building a large new addition to their church hall, with a gymnasium to be used by poor neighborhood youth and for church suppers. Then after a word of blessing, Marion took her seat.

At the close of the worship service, Marion was again called to the front of the church. The pastor said that her words had thrilled their hearts. They wanted her to have the morning offering to help with building the new gymnasium in Los Angeles – about \$140.

With overflowing joy and generosity, the Chinese Christians gave beyond their ability to give. One might say that the American church did not need the money; the Chinese church made up of poor farmers needed it much worse. But the Chinese Christians wanted to give, to share, with others in the world.

That's the true spirit of Christian giving – an eagerness to give, and give generously. God calls on us, as people of Canada, who have received so much, to do no less. There are so many needs around us – in our own country, yes, but also in other parts of the world that need what we can offer, when our spirits are moved to compassionate and generous giving. We are all connected, one with another, we all depend on one another for survival, and to get along in this world we all need to share and share alike.

I expect you all remember the tragedy of the Humboldt Broncos bus accident from April of this year, which killed 16 – including young hockey players and others travelling with them. When word of that accident reached Jinja, Uganda, there was profound sadness at the St. James Orthopedic Clinic and among the hundreds of young patients it has helped over the past 5 years.

The clinic is a partner with One4Another International, a Canadian based charity that helps children with birth defects or injuries get on their feet, sometimes for the first time. The charity is supported almost entirely by young Canadian hockey players through about 25 hockey programs, primarily in Ontario.

But it does more than raise money for surgery – it also connects young Canadians with the Ugandan youth they are helping through letters, videos and gift exchanges. That way, Ugandan children feel a

connection with the Canadian teams, and the players in this country get to know the children they are helping in Africa.

That's why, after hearing about the Broncos accident, 13 year old Sadam Lukwago felt compelled to don his Oakville Rangers jersey, and travel an hour from his home in Njeru to the charity's headquarters in Jinja to hold up a sign of support for the people of Humboldt.

Sadam Lukwago was born with a club foot that made it difficult for him to get around, go to school, or even dream of a better future. In the corner of Uganda where he was born, there are few prospects for disabled children such as him. But through the support of the charity One4Another, and the Oakville Rangers hockey players, he was able to have the surgery to repair his foot. And so, walking an hour, he came wearing his jersey from Canada, to send a message to the Humboldt players and their families. What a heart-warming story of true generosity of spirit – on the part of a young Ugandan boy and his long walk – and on the part of young *Canadian* hockey players whose caring connection and fundraising are making a real difference.

Is Canada perfect? We know better. We still have grinding poverty in this country—in our cities and especially in our indigenous communities, where substandard housing and lack of clean drinking water continue to cause outrage. Poor diet, homelessness,

chronic unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, bullying, prejudice, discrimination, violence, and a host of other ills plague people and whole neighborhoods in many parts of our country. No, this nation is not perfect.

And yet, the Bible is clear that what makes a nation great is its compassion for the least, the last and the lost among its citizens. It is our willingness to extend mercy to the vulnerable and marginalized that shows the true character of a nation.

Jesus taught that the greatest of the commandments is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and love your neighbor as yourself. On the night before he died, he reminded his disciples that they were called to be servants, and told them how to live as his disciples, saying, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And then he demonstrated, in the symbol of broken bread, just how deep that love is. To love others as Jesus loved us—that is the Christian ethic pure and simple. A nation is only as Christian as it practices that commandment by putting love into action.

On this Canada Day, perhaps we all need to make a personal re-commitment to living lives that are pleasing to God. And then we need to demonstrate that commitment in the unselfish management and sharing of our resources, the prayerful support of our leaders, and a loving reaffirmation of the principles that have guided God's people over the years, especially the principle that says "Love one another."

