

July 3 Reflection offered by Laura

Long weekends are often a time when people gather with family and friends. In fact, my hometown of Naicam is hosting their reunion this weekend. Folks from all over returning to a place they once lived and reconnecting with family and friends... some of whom they only ever see at the Naicam homecoming. Whenever I gather with family and friends from my younger days, I'm always amazed by how different we are from each other. There are times I find it hard to believe that we all grew up in the same small community or even in the same small family. Diversity is something that I value so much... Diversity of desires, hopes, dreams... Diversity of values, opinions, viewpoints... This is what keeps life interesting. It also makes it challenging... sometimes VERY challenging. and there is no place where that challenge is more evident than on social media.

There have been many times... especially over the last couple of years... when I've gone to my facebook or Instagram feed to find an opinion posted or article shared on some controversial topic... and it is not at all unusual for me to see a link shared from someone close to me expressing one opinion followed immediately by a link shared, by another family member or close friend, expressing a completely different opinion. Often I am amused by this... sometimes I'm annoyed. I rarely comment – partly because I prefer to avoid conflict... but also because I don't think social media is the best place to have these conversations... its easier to be open and compassionate when I am looking into someone's eyes and seeing them as a whole person, rather than just an opinion on the screen.

Well this weekend, as folks were preparing for Canada Day Celebrations, I've scrolled through my social media again in awe of the diversity of very strong opinions I see there.

Canada Day has raised all sorts of troubling questions... some of them quite divisive. I think the most obvious questions I've encountered have been about how we can celebrate a day that came about because of colonization of a land that resulted in the genocide of many of its original people? Is Canada Day respectful and inclusive of the indigenous peoples who had already been here for hundreds of years?

The celebration of Canada Day frustrates and angers many people...

And I get that... it does seem to privilege one set of stories over others... pushing aside a very important piece of history in order to lift up another.

And of course, because cultures are created out of the dominant stories, this choice of celebration also seems to give priority to the advancement of one culture over all others.

Anyway... all of these posts and discussions have raised some questions for me about culture... and that's what I'd like to spend some time reflecting on with you this morning.

In today's gospel story, Jesus is sending his disciples out to all the places he will go and gives them two messages he wants them to share... the first is an offering of peace and the second is that the kingdom of God is near.

It seems to me people today have become confused about the messages Jesus came to share. Often I hear teachings that his message was about a sacrificial death on the cross... or about doing what we can to be saved from an eternity of gnashing teeth and fire.

But the message we hear today is not one about our future life... or what will happen to us once we die... it's a message about the kingdom of God... right here and now!

"The kingdom of God is here... we come in peace and we invite you to share in God's peace with us"

Isn't that a great message...
but what does it actually mean?
What is this kingdom of God?

The trouble is, the idea of kingdoms is not one we use anymore.
Even most countries that have monarchies are not technically kingdoms.
But in Jesus's day, the people were entirely familiar with announcements like this one.
It wasn't at all unusual for people to hear announcements like:
"Good News! The kingdom of Rome has arrived and is now in charge here. Peace and prosperity are guaranteed for you... by Rome."

I'm sure that whether or not that announcement felt like good news depended a lot on who you were and on your cultural perspective.

The announcement in 1867 here in Canada wasn't a whole lot different.
"Good news! The United Kingdom has arrived and taken charge of this land."
Who exactly was that good news for? (pause)

So what does this mean for what Jesus was saying about the kingdom of God?
The fact that he used such familiar political language can hardly be an accident.
You can see why the kingdom of Rome saw Jesus and his followers as a threat.
If they are telling everybody that Rome is now in charge, and someone comes along saying, "Actually, we've got a different view on who's in charge,"
it's probably not going to end well...
it's probably not going to end in a nice cooperative power-sharing arrangement,
More likely... its going to end in blood and tears.

But when Jesus uses the language of kingdoms at that time... the political implications were clearly intentional.

But what do we make of it now?
Kingdoms aren't really part of our political thinking.
Is Jesus just saying that God is in charge now?

Some folks feel that we need to find a new word to translate the idea of the kingdom, because kingdom no longer communicates what it once did.
Some people have gone for words like reign of God or realm of God, but I'm not sure those are a whole lot more helpful.
So what might be more helpful?
What is this kingdom and how can we best describe it... to make sense of it today?

Well... I wonder if a helpful way of thinking about the meaning of the kingdom of God now is to think of it as culture... the culture of God.

"Great news! The time has come, and the culture of God is emerging... you really want to be part of this."

That might, at first, seem less political and less about who is in charge, but.. I don't know... stop and think about the ways we talk about culture now.
I've often heard the phrase "cultural imperialism" which brings together the ideas of culture and empire or kingdom.
And we talk about dominant cultures, and about cultural assimilation, and about cultural appropriation, and even culture wars.

These ideas are very much about the power that cultures have...
the powerful influence they have over people's lives.

And more importantly, culture is very much about the way people behave and relate to each other, and who they identify with and what they regard as important.

In many places people tend to feel a much stronger sense of allegiance to their culture than they do to the political structures.

You can easily get away with making fun of our political systems, symbols and leaders...

but I wonder if folks are more defensive about making fun of Canadian culture?

Culture is who we are and how we do things...

what we value and stand for.

Criticizing our culture is like criticizing the core of who we are.

Now when we hear Jesus saying, "The culture of God is at hand, get on board", I'm sure most of us wouldn't hear that as the kind of threat that the Roman empire thought it was.

This... I think... is because most of us feel so comfortable in and positive about our culture that we imagine that the culture of God is a lot like it... only a little better.

We think the culture of God is built on the values that we hold dear and that the disruptive problematic people will have been removed.

It will be our culture, but completely harmonious.

We Canadians are probably especially prone to this thinking because we are so proud of our multiculturalism, so we think we have already brought together the best of all the world's cultures and fulfilled the biblical image of gathering all nations into one family.

And yet, despite the multicultural diversity, we continue to want things to stay the way they have always been. We welcome you to come here and to be like us – to use our language, adapt to our way of doing things, share our values... our traditions.

I wonder if we subconsciously think of our culture as most reflecting the culture of God... and, therefore, right.

And yet, if we read Jesus stories and look at how he challenged traditional values... particularly those values that kept some in positions of power while others were pushed down, or pushed aside... we see that our tendency to hold onto tradition for tradition's sake is not what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

Traditional values and traditional cultural practices and institutions are of questionable value in light of the massive cultural change that is the emerging kingdom of God.

I'm not going to spend time this morning really reflecting on how the culture of God might look different from Canadian culture... or any other culture for that matter... but I do hope you will spend some time reflecting on that on your own...

But, I can't in good conscience sidestep this completely so let me just focus on one obvious area of difference... unfortunately I think it may be the one that most often provokes angst and hostility.

The culture of God is so radically inclusive that it does not and will not favor the interests of one group over those of another.

Jesus got himself in a lot of trouble when he preached that that God was not on the side of Israel or against Israel's enemies...

because God does not take sides with anyone.

So what would God do with my social media feed?

This weekend, among all of the photos of friends and relatives celebrating Canada Day with facepaints, flags and long lists of gratitude for the freedom found in this amazing country...

among these celebrations were posts calling us to remember the truth of our past as we consider how we might move forward in a better way...

there were posts from individuals and organizations inviting Canadians to continue to remember those whose lives were taken in residential schools and honour those who survived with scarred bodies and hearts.

I have also seen many articles posted by various indigenous organizations and people filled with hurt and disillusionment.

Reading these posts while reflecting on "the good news of God's culture" has been confusing... challenging... a little enlightening.

Such is the journey with Jesus.

It is so very true that the culture of God is radically inclusive and does not favor the interest of one group over another...

but it is also true that again and again throughout the stories of Jesus we learn of him standing with those who are oppressed... those on the margins of the dominant culture of his time.

I can't help asking myself where I am in the Jesus stories?

I'm not sure I like the answer.

That doesn't mean I shouldn't ask the question and reflect on what it means for me to be extended an invitation to share in the peace of Christ... what it means to live in.. and help create... the kingdom of God.

What does that mean for me?

What does that mean for all of us?

I wish I had an clear and easy answer to that question...

I wish I could make it a more comfortable question...

But I can't.

All I can offer is an affirmation that the struggle is real...

Responding to the call to jump on board with the culture of God is not easy...

Living God's way rarely is...

But it is worth the effort...

I've experienced the peace of Christ...

I've tasted the beauty of God's culture...

It's worth the struggle.

And God is with us in that struggle.

As we struggle to move along in repenting...

taking baby steps... falling down, crying and getting back up...

we remember we are not alone...

God is with us

Always.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.