

“Reflections on 150 Years”

June 25, 2017
Zechariah 9: 9-10 & Ephesians 2: 14-22

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The motto of Canada in Latin is: “A Mari usque ad Mare.” Most mottos are written in Latin. It means “From Sea to Sea.” It comes from Zechariah 9, or Psalm 72: “his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.”

As of this coming Saturday, Canada will be 150 years old. It is a proud time for our country. We have at last become comfortable with who we are as a nation. If that sounds like a rather strange thing to say let me take you back to the 1950s when I was young. In those years the big debate and the most troubling issue concerning this land was about our identity as a nation. Who were we? What made us in any way distinct? You see up to the 1940s we knew exactly who we were. We were part of the British Empire – and proud of it. How many of you here remember the wall maps in school, the ones where the British Empire was coloured a kind of pinkish red. It covered half the globe. And that was us! We were so proud to be part of it.

But following the Second World War the once mighty British Empire began to disintegrate and disappear. India left in 1948 and virtually every other former colony demanded its independence. The Empire became the Commonwealth – a shadow of its former self, – and that left us with a question. Who were we as Canadians? Many in those years predicted that it was just a matter of time before we ended up joining with the United States. Our language and culture seemed so very similar. We watched the same movies, we read the same magazines, cheered for the same sports teams, – even told the same jokes. How were we any different? It troubled us. Sixty years later those worries have disappeared. Our inferiority

complex with the USA has disappeared and we are deeply proud to be citizens of Canada – a nation with a truly distinct culture and identity.

I would like to make a few observations about the last 150 years that have shaped our destiny as a nation. The first is to observe that we came into existence in 1867 through negotiation – not out of revolution, fighting or bloodshed. This has left us with a couple of legacies. One is that we like negotiating. It's a slow and painful process but it works and it is what binds us together.

A second legacy is that we tend to trust our governments and we like it when they do things to make our country better. We sometimes have to push our politicians – but they are always a part of every important change. A corollary to this is, for the most part, we trust our police. The vast majority of us feel quite safe in this country – absolutely no need to be armed. This is in marked contrast with our neighbours to the south. In the US you often hear the government described as 'a swamp that needs to be drained'. I have met any number of Americans who have a deep distrust of government and politicians. The online jokes about politicians (they all come from the US) are brutally negative. I never pass them on. I don't like them. America, in contrast to Canada, was born out of rebellion against the government of the day. And that legacy lives on.

This past March on Hilton Head Island there was a knock on our front door. A good friend of ours, an American, dropped by to chat. He is a super guy, well educated, a professional IT whiz – a devout Christian – just a very nice man. What took us by surprise is that on this visit he was quite casually wearing a gun in his belt. To him it was totally normal. Like most Americans he has never actually had to use it. But it's important to him – a kind of security blanket. In the US there are now more guns than there are people – a lot more – with a huge number of resulting injuries and fatalities. Many are accidental, like the senior in Florida this past February who was at the cash fumbling for his wallet to pay for his Sunday Brunch – likely after going to Church. As he fumbled around for his wallet his gun slipped out of his belt, hit the floor, and went off hitting both him and a nearby lady. Why does he need a gun? But you see past history always lives on. It becomes part of the national DNA. That is why it is important to know about the past.

A second comment that I wish to make about our nation at 150 concerns the one big stain on our past. In the mid 1860's we did not know what to do with our First Nations people. We called them our North American Indians. They were regarded as a primitive group whose language, culture and spirituality were of no value. What we really wanted

was to have them meld into mainstream culture and in time to fade away. To assist in this process, residential schools were set up. They were funded by the Canadian Government but operated by the Churches. I don't need to tell you how bad they were. It is common knowledge now. Tuberculosis in the schools was rampant. The death rate was appalling. While it is important to acknowledge that there were many caring, well-meaning teachers, the whole system was terribly, terribly wrong. We are only beginning to deal with the fallout in our own time. As I said before, the past, for good or for ill, lives on and affects today. I believe that we are now on the right track to turn this around.

But now let me turn to the Church in Canada over the last 150 years. I want to start with a story. When I was at Carleton University in the late 1950's there were three Christian clubs on Campus. The Roman Catholics had the Newman Club, the Anglicans had the Canterbury Club and mainline Protestant Christians had the S.C.M. – the Student Christian Movement. The SCM had branches on all North American campuses. In my second year I was elected President of the Carleton S.C.M. I decided to have a chat with a friend and fellow history major, George Riley. He was president of the Newman Club – the Roman Catholic group. We took the same classes. I knew him well. I went to George early in the year and proposed holding a few joint meetings. It seemed obvious to me that we must have many things in common and that it would be good to have dialogue with each other. But if it was obvious to me, it wasn't obvious to George. Standing by his locker he said to me, "Al, to be honest, we are the only true Christian Church. We believe we are right and you are wrong and we have nothing to talk about." He slammed his locker shut and walked away, leaving me standing there with my mouth open.

Competition, confrontation, and overt hostility were a basic reality of Christianity in Canada for at least 100 of our last 150 years. Brand loyalty was everything. If you moved from one city to another you attended your brand of Church. We used to give transfer certificates to families who were moving. They presented them to the United Church in their new community. If a Protestant dared to marry a Catholic, it was called "a mixed marriage." It was not recommended.

Two other characteristics defined Christianity in the first 100 years. First, it was socially important to attend Church on a Sunday morning. Almost everyone (over 90%) of Canadians did. Appearances were very important. If you were a male you wore a suit and tie and black shoes to Church. If you were a woman you wore a good dress, a nice hat and gloves, preferably white. The whole family went to Church, including the

children. As children we were not required to like it, but we were required to go. Many still yearn for the good old days when the Churches were full.

The problem with social or cultural Christianity is that it never had much affect on people's lives throughout the rest of the week. In other words, there was little or no Spiritual depth. The very idea that the Spirit of Christ was alive with the power to change and transform a person – a power that can heal deep hurts (and we all have them), addictions (and we all have them), and hang-ups – those deeply troubling things from our past — that wasn't even talked about. Attending Church was more about appearance. There was very little spiritual depth behind it, if any. And I am sure this was a major reason why so many young people turned away from the Church in the 1960s. They had watched their parents (you can fool your friends your neighbours, but you can't fool your kids!) and they concluded that Christianity was an empty vessel. Over the years I've had many adult Boomers tell me this to me in various different ways.

The other characteristic that dominated Christianity in the first 100 years were rules and prohibitions. In our Methodist tradition good Christians did not dance, or drink, gamble, or go to the theatre. If you did any of things you did them surreptitiously – not openly. (The bottle of booze was in the barn, not in the house.) It is rather the same approach to faith that the Pharisees had in Jesus time. The Pharisees had hundreds of rules that one must either do or never do to please God. Jesus had no use for them. He called them hypocrites. Legalism is the opposite of what Jesus taught, and yet somehow became a defining characteristic of Christianity for years.

It was in the mid 1960's that Churches began to decline. The generation that we called the Baby Boomers in large measure stopped going to Church and most never came back. It was a phenomenon that affected all Churches – not just the United. In the United Church we reached our peak of membership in 1964 and have declined ever since. I was ordained just as it was all beginning. All through my years in ministry I have watched our Church decline. For years at official levels it was never talked about. Not once do I recall a meeting of Conference, or General Council where the question "What are we doing wrong?" was asked, let alone debated. I think we didn't know what to do. We kept hoping everything would change and people would suddenly come back to Church.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates the depth of the problem. In April of 1995 two young girls on their way to BCI were killed on the railway tracks. They had waited while one train went by, and then stepped out –

right into the path of another train, which was going the opposite way. The shock of it affected this entire community. The two girls were Candi and Dawn. Dawn's grandfather Lloyd and her family were very active members here. I did both funeral services. Candi's service was at BCI in the Auditorium. All the staff and students came, as well as family and officials from the School Board. As I was putting the service together, I wondered what hymns I should choose. The family had left it up to me. The first choice was easy. Everyone knows Amazing Grace. It is the one Christian hymn that has gone beyond the bounds of the sacred over into the secular domain. Even people who never darken a Church door know Amazing Grace. The second hymn was the problem. I finally settled on "O God Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope For Years to Come." It was (and still is) a golden oldie – often sung at Remembrance Day Services. I hoped that most would know it.

We opened the service with Amazing Grace. Everyone sang – including all the students. We closed with "O God Our Help in Ages Past." I felt like I was singing a solo. The kids stood silently. It was a totally foreign song to them. Afterwards, as I walked slowly back to our Church from BCI, I remember thinking that if the kids today had never heard 'O God Our Help in Ages Past,' we were in serious trouble. The simple truth was our 150 - 200 year-old music did not speak to those kids in any way. It was a totally foreign language to them.

So it was that I slowly but surely started making changes here at Wall Street United Church. Throughout those years I had a ton of critics. People hate change – especially in their Church. I had people yelling at me. They didn't quite throw hymnbooks – I think some wanted to. A number left. But the one thing I knew then, deep down - one thing I was certain of and kept saying over and over was this: *If we are to have any hope of survival as a Church, the status quo (the old way) is not an option.* The Wall Street United Church you and I are part of today is a very different Church from the one I came to 30 years ago.

I want to close this reflection on the past 150 years with this thought about our faith. The longer I live, the more I admire and find deeply attractive the things that Jesus taught and who he was and what he did. I am sure that there is no other model, no other guide, no other way that has anything like the power of Christ to make us into far better people and Canada into a far better nation.

I read recently that when Saint Francis of Assisi's life was almost over he said to his astonished followers, "Brothers let us begin to serve the Lord our God, for up until now we have done little or nothing." Why did he say

that on his death bed? Francis knew that by the power of the risen Christ there are always times and ways to begin again — even at the end of life, at the end of an era, in the midst of failure. By God's grace, it is especially when we feel like giving up, that the gift of new life and renewal comes to us. In the winter season, when so many lose hope, and we don't even know how to begin again, that is exactly when the dream of spring with the energy of life comes to us and is forever ours. That energy—the eternal Spirit is here today. It has touched so many of you. This energy of love is by far the most powerful and beautiful force that our world has ever known, and you are deeply part of it. It resides in you.

As we move into the future and another epoch of the land we call Canada, let us here at Wall Street resolve to be the most loving, caring group of people that we can possibly be, and to help make our Canada into in the most caring and loving nation that it can possibly be. Amen.