

## Reconciliation in the Watershed

Homily at the Church of the Holy Trinity, 15 December 2013

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### Readings:

- Isaiah 11: 1-10
- Luke 1: 46-55
- Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths*, 2012 VIII (Wendell Berry, *This Day*, p. 383.)

*Since, despite the stern demands  
of scientist and realist, we will always  
be supposing, let us suppose  
that Nature gave the world flowers  
and birdsong as a language, by which  
it might speak to discerning humans.  
And what must we say back? Not  
just thanks or praise, but acts  
of kindness bespeaking kinship  
with creatures and with Nature, acts  
faithful as the woods that dwells in place  
time out of mind, self-denying  
as the parenthood of the birds, and like  
the flowers humble and beautiful.*

It's too bad the reading from Isaiah doesn't mention any sea animals among its list of suddenly cooperative mammals and reptiles but then again, given that Isaiah was from the kingdom of Judah, and the only sea that it bordered was the Dead Sea, he probably didn't have a lot of familiarity with things that swim.



So, in the spirit of acknowledging and welcoming the animals that is a part of the Advent Garden tradition, I've brought a sea animal with me. It's a Coast Salish carving of an orca, or killer whale. I like the orca. It's a beautiful animal, said in some traditions to have been born from the union of a whale and an osprey. It's a fierce and effective hunter. It's also a highly social animal organized in matrilineal family groupings. Orcas are understood in some Indigenous cultures to be the embodiment of deceased chiefs and to rule over or care for the world of the sea. And even though it's an animal that we think of as belonging to the Pacific Ocean watershed, carvings of orcas have been found in Maritime Archaic Indian sites in Newfoundland, in the Atlantic Ocean watershed.

[Orca Carving by Dora Edwards.](#)

[Photo: Sara Stratton, 2013.](#)

It's a powerful animal to hold in our minds as we think about watersheds, which is what I want to talk about today as part of KAIROS' new program of Watershed Discipleship.

A watershed is an area of land whose lakes and rivers all drain out to a common body of water. It can be as small as the Humber-Don or as big as the Atlantic Ocean watershed, which stretches from Thunder Bay to Cape Spear, from Windsor up to the edge of the Canadian shield and across to the northernmost tip of Labrador.

All of us here, we're in the Humber-Don watershed.

It's a long way from where I grew up, Corner Brook, in the Humber watershed of western Newfoundland.

And further still from where, before Corner Brook, my family lived for generations – small settlements like Greenspond and Safe Harbour in the Northwestern Bonavista Bay watershed.

Asked to name some native plant and animal species from my home watershed, I'd name trillium, sumac, pickerel, racoon and northern cardinal.



Northern Cardinal in the Lower Don Valley, Humber-Don watershed

And I'd also name partridgeberry, Labrador tea, Northern cod, caribou and gannet.

Asked to name who else shares –or once shared– my home watershed I’d name the Mississaugas of the New Credit. And I’d also name the Qalipu Mi’kmaq. And the Beothuk.

Asked what threatens my watershed, I’d say pipelines, over-development, and aging nuclear infrastructure. And I’d also say hydraulic fracturing and deep sea oil drilling.

My point here is that I can’t really separate my watersheds – the places where my biological family rooted and grew, and the very different place, nearly 3000 km away, where my spouse and I have rooted ourselves for the past 25 years. Reflecting on this some time ago, I realized that I invoke one home even as I constantly point back to the other.

Conveniently, though, it turns out that I don’t really have to choose, because all of the watersheds I identify with so strongly are connected. There are 594 local watersheds across Canada, and with the exception of a handful that are closed, they all flow into one of North America’s five major watersheds: the Atlantic Ocean, Hudson Bay, the Arctic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean.

My three watersheds are all a part of the larger Atlantic Ocean watershed. I have always thought of Toronto and Corner Brook as being miles apart, not just geographically but also in terms of sensibility. But some of the struggles that we face in Toronto –say, for example, around the reversal of Line 9– are not so far removed from the recent struggle over fracking off the west coast of Newfoundland, which has resulted in a temporary moratorium.

And because our 5 major watersheds empty out into the oceans, they are connected to each other, and to watersheds around the world. Through watersheds, through water and land and all the beings that depend on them –through all the elements of the advent garden which you have been building here at Holy Trinity– we and our struggles are all connected.

But the word “watershed” is not just used by geographers. It also refers to time, as in a “watershed moment” (also known to some of us as a *kairos* moment!) – the time when it becomes clear that something is changing, or has to change.

We are at such a moment in Canada right now. With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission scheduled to conclude in 2015, non-Indigenous Canadians are faced with the choice of whether we will truly choose to live a reconciled relationship with the Indigenous peoples with whom we share this land.

The history we share is, as I think everyone in this church knows, violent and painful. It moved from cooperation to subjugation and assimilation, to dehumanization and cultural genocide. If you asked me personally whether I thought such a history merited any measure of forgiveness, then I would answer you honestly, as someone with a PhD in history and as someone who claims to be a Christian: No.

Luckily, there are more generous souls in the world than I, and through their wisdom and grace, we have arrived at this moment of potential reconciliation. Playing with language can be dangerous, because no word comes without baggage, but I ask you to trust my intention here when I suggest that we might twist the scripture on its head and say that, in the case of the TRC, the lamb has decided, for all that it entails, to be in the company of the wolf. The question I ask is whether the wolf will respond in requisite measure to this wholly unearned act of trust.

I ask that because we are also at a watershed moment as we face the impacts of resource extraction, fossil fuel addiction, and climate change on the land, the water, and all that depend on them. Most of these lands, here in Canada and around the world, are the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples. If we are going to live into reconciliation, we have to think long and hard about the conduct and impacts of the extractive sector.

Shell's Jackpine mine is a tar sands project on Athabasca Chipewyan territory north of Fort McMurray. The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation opposes the expansion of this mine out of concern for ecological and human health, and on the grounds they have not been properly consulted under the terms of their treaty, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Section 35 of the Canadian constitution. When I accompanied a group of church leaders to the region in 2009, members of Fort McMurray First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation and the Athabasca Chipewyan, including Chief Alan Adam, spoke to us about the impacts of oil exploration. I will never forget Chief Adam's fierce identification of his way of life and his very being with the land that he grew up on. Neither will I forget Violet, an elder from Fort McMurray who told me about picking blueberries and cutting holes into the muskeg, then dipping buckets in to pull out clear drinking water. She did that in an area called Mildred Lake, which sits between the Suncor and Syncrude plants about 50 km north of Fort McMurray. The chief geographic feature there now is an enormous, steeply banked tailings pond that has dried out and looks like a desert. A toxic desert. No muskeg or blueberries in sight.

The approach we are encouraged to take to projects like these is purely economic. The recent decision by the federal cabinet to allow Jackpine to move forward is a classic example. The Joint Review panel for the project found that it "would likely have significant adverse environmental effects on wetlands, traditional plant potential areas, wetland-reliant species at risk, migratory birds that are wetland-reliant or species at risk, and biodiversity." It also pointed out that there was an inadequate mitigation plan to deal with such issues.

Yet last week the minister of the environment said in a statement that cabinet had "decided that the significant adverse environmental effects that the designated project is likely to cause are justified in the circumstances," and approved the expansion. The minister added that Shell needed to develop a mitigation plan to deal with harm to birds and fish, and in a nod to questions about human health impacts, develop an odour management plan. As for the First Nations in the area, they need to be notified about access to lands not currently being worked as part of the project. Not consulted, not asked for consent; notified.

I'm pretty sure that many of us here have personal connections to the mining and oil and gas industry. As a Newfoundlander, members of my family work in those sectors. So I understand that there is something to the economic argument.

But I also understand that there's something in the environmental argument; there's something in understanding and taking responsibility for our impact on the earth.

And I understand there's something in relational arguments; there's something in understanding and taking responsibility for the impact of our use of the earth on all other beings that share it. There's something in acknowledging that others have a say in what we do, that others have the right to consent. Or not.

But these are not the arguments we're hearing. Even as we travel one path of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada, we travel another of pushing through what we want, of prioritizing economic growth over our relationship with the whole of creation – of the earth and all that is in it. I'm sorry to say it, but I don't think the wolf is willing to be in meaningful company with the lamb. And we are determined to destroy what is on that holy mountain.

How can we change this story? We can start by practicing watershed discipleship. Ask yourself the same questions I asked myself a few minutes ago. What's my watershed? With whom and what do I share it? Who came here before me? What threatens my watershed? What's my responsibility to my watershed and all that share it with me? How will I be in relationship?

We can listen more carefully to Wendell Berry, patron saint of watershed discipleship. We can practice "acts of kindness bespeaking kinship with creatures and with Nature" – acts that I think are described in other words in the reading from Isaiah, when all those creatures, normally predator and prey, choose to be together in a moment of truce, a moment of reconciliation, a moment perhaps of forgiveness.

Isaiah assumes that it is the predator –the powerful– who makes this choice to be in right relationship. Luke's Magnificat assumes something else entirely, that the powerful have been brought low by God. There's a grace in the first, I suppose, and a certain kind of justice in the second.

But there's a different path of getting there, I think, one that is experiential and connects us with where we are and with whom we share this space. One that helps us to see our interconnectedness, and our responsibility to each other, and to everything around us. And I don't think we can get there if only one party moves forward or we rely on some kind of divine or cosmic come-uppance.

I think we get there if we learn to speak a new kind of language, if, as discerning human beings, we pay attention and respond in action – in acts as faithful as the woods. If we seek to be reconciled with the earth and all that is in it.

And so back to my orca. I bought it on my last trip to BC, on a whim. It was a raven I was after, a raven carrying an abalone sun in its mouth. And I got my raven, but this small orca on the wall beckoned me. I asked after it, and was intrigued when the gallery owner told me it was carved by a woman. So I bought it and packed it away in my luggage. A couple of days later as I unwrapped it and turned it over in my hands, I saw that it was made by Dora Edwards on Penelakut Island.

I'm pretty sure I laughed in a moment of recognition. Penelakut Island is the home of Jill Harris, a residential schools survivor and a key member of our "Women of Courage" program, which brings together women human rights defenders from Canada and around the world. Jill's community was profoundly impacted by the residential schools system, and has suffered great loss from the wounds opened up by the TRC. It is among those Indigenous communities in BC that wonders about the ecological impacts of pipelines carrying crude oil and bitumen to the coast for export.

And now I have ended up with this carving of an orca, representing power and protection, made by a woman in Jill's community.

It's just a coincidence, but a fitting one. And I may be reading more into it than I should, but I'm pretty sure I know where the reconciliation journey needs to take us.

I think it's fitting –and a little daunting– that, in this watershed moment, this symbol

somehow came to me from Penelakut.



Jill Harris with Chantal Bilulu, a Woman of Courage from the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Penelekut. Photo: Rachel Warden, 2011

And so what must I say back? Not just thanks or praise, but acts of kindness bespeaking kinship.

Amen.

Additional References:

- [www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/energy-and-resources/ottawa-approves-shells-jackpine-oil-sands-expansion/article15813249/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/energy-and-resources/ottawa-approves-shells-jackpine-oil-sands-expansion/article15813249/)