

Identity Matters

Mark 5:21-43

Canada Day Sunday

3rd July 2011

One of the biggest fears that immigrants have when moving from the country of their birth to live in Canada is that they will have to change the way they speak. That they will lose their native tongue. Why do you think Evelyn and I go back to Scotland regularly? So that we can learn how to roll our “Rs” again, say “Aye” instead of “yes”, “wee” instead of “small” and “garage” instead of “graaage”.

Mind you, this fear works both ways. Canadians going to live overseas experience the same kind of anxiety about their native tongue. In an article in *The Globe & Mail*, last week Rebecca Connop Price from British Columbia tells of the language challenges she has faced since going to live in Wales 7 years ago.

“I have found, to my great distress,” she confesses, “that I am beginning to forget what I, as an English-speaking Canadian, should be saying or how I should pronounce it. When I left Canada at 23 ... I felt strongly rooted to our great nation. I’m now married to a Brit, and as the years go by, I have begun to notice those roots becoming increasingly fragile. At 30, I’m heartbroken that I have left Canada, and that Canada is starting to leave me.

“It’s not just language that separates the two cultures, but it is a key feature that defines us. Brits call their sidewalks “pavements,” their car trunks “boots,” their candies “sweets,” and they don’t know what a tuque is. To blend in and relate to those around me, I have had to learn to strip my vocabulary of any foreign-sounding words.

“Though at first using a “loo” seemed strange, and asking for directions to a “toilet” seemed a tad too direct, I now find it quaint when I hear tourists ask directions to the ‘washroom’. I’ve referred to hockey as “ice hockey” – even to Canadian friends – a sure sign that my cultural boundaries have shifted. In Britain, field hockey is the more popular sport and retains the generic “hockey” title.

“It’s not surprising that I am adapting my language to my surroundings. When in Rome, right? But there are increasingly moments when, along with my Canadian language, I feel my Canadian identity is slowly slipping away.”¹

“I feel my Canadian identity is slowly slipping away” ... Of course, no Canadians worth their salt want to lose their national identity – whether they are living abroad or whether they are living at home. And it is possible, we should remind ourselves, for Canadians to do exactly that, to lose their essential Canadianness without ever putting a foot outside the country and without ever changing the way they speak. It is possible for Canadians to erode the fundamentals of their national identity right here at home by losing touch with their core values and forgetting their shared characteristics.

One of the characteristics that is essential to the Canadian identity and must never be lost is quite simply the ability people have in this country to laugh at themselves. Not to take themselves too seriously. We too often assume that people of other countries do the same but that isn’t so where skins are thinner and uptightness is a way of life. For instance, try going down to the States and listening to hear if there are any jokes about tea parties, or going to France and picking up the latest humour about cordon bleu cuisine, or going to Australia and asking about the frailties of the national cricket team. If we do, we might realise that the Canadian propensity for self-deprecating humour is not as widespread as we thought.

Did you hear the one about the Englishman, the Scotsman, the Canadian and the American who were captured by terrorists? The terrorist leader said, “Before we shoot you, you will be allowed a few last words on the topic of your choice.” The Englishman replied, “I wish to speak of loyalty and service to the Crown.” The Scotsman said, “I will talk about haggis, whisky and the Highlands.” The Canadian replied, “Obviously since the demise of Bin Laden you terrorists have become deeply involved in questions of identity and succession, so I wish to talk to you about the history of constitutional process in Canada, special status, distinct society and peaceful transfer of power within the context of a parliamentary democracy.” With an absolutely bored look on his face, the American spoke up, “Can I make a special request?” he asked, “Just shoot me before the Canadian starts talking.”

Stories like this show we Canadians can laugh at ourselves. We don’t take ourselves too seriously. Unlike some other countries we know, we can poke fun at our national characteristics without feeling threatened. This is fundamental to who we are. The kind of people we are. Part of our national identity.

But what are the other parts of our Canadian identity that we must take care not to lose? What are the other elements that define the essence of Canadianism?

One essential characteristic, I believe, is the ability Canadians have to listen to one another with interest and empathy. That is a characteristic which would make Will and Kate good Canadians. I was greatly impressed with the way they interacted with people during their time on Parliament Hill on Friday. Unlike some royals of the past whom we might feel were simply forcing a smile for the occasion and simply making polite conversation. It seemed as if the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were really interested in the people they met and were genuinely listening to what they were saying.

One thing that has impressed me over the years I have attended the General Assemblies of our church is how

everyone gets to have their say. The assembly commissioners are so patient and attentive to each other. One year, a lady, a visiting missionary to the Assembly, was so amazed by this that she remarked, “You Canadians really know how to listen to one another.” And she was right. Along with our ability to laugh at ourselves, this is an integral element of our national identity: our capacity for listening to each other.

Unfortunately, though, we have allowed this propensity for “hearing others out” to slip in recent years. I am distressed, for instance, that our federal government does not seem to be listening to the concerns of people over the export of asbestos from Canada to developing countries when its dangers are so well known and documented. I am distressed by parents who don’t communicate with their children, giving them everything they need in a material sense, except the one thing they need most of all – a listening ear. I am distressed when, in church life, people don’t consult with each other. When they jump to conclusions and make assumptions rather than enter into dialogue and discussion on crucial issues.

The ability to listen to each other is certainly a most important value in society, in our community and in our personal relationships. But if we want it to remain as an integral part of our Canadian identity, then we have to work at it. What we take for granted, so often we lose.

Let’s always remember, of course, that treating others equally is also a large part of who we are as Canadians. And that is a value that comes straight from the Bible

The passage we read from Mark’s Gospel this morning intertwines two stories of healing on the shores of Lake Galilee. A man pleads with Jesus to go and heal his sick daughter. But on the way, a woman, suffering from a menstrual disorder, touches the hem of his garment with the fingers of faith. Jesus brings healing to her before continuing on to revive the little girl from what appeared to be a coma. Now, the significant part of this story is that these two people come from a very different social background. One is the daughter of Jairus, an influential synagogue leader, and the other is a poor, marginalised woman, a social outcast. Yet, Jesus tends to these two very different people equally, with similar compassion.² And we see that happening time and time again throughout the Gospels. Jesus has no favourites. No one receives preferential treatment. Everyone, no matter their standing in society, no matter their wealth or lack of it, is dealt with equally.

This Christian concept of equal treatment, of equal caring, has long been a core value of our Canadian society. It is what built our schools, our nursing homes, our hospitals, our equal-access health-care system and the many forms of outreach to the marginalised in our society. But, unfortunately, in the increasingly “me-first, survival-of-the-fittest, leave-everyone-to-their-own-devices” times we live in, it has become something of an endangered species. We plead “compassion burnout” or lack of financial resources to excuse ourselves from treating the

poor or the homeless or the mentally disabled or the immigrant in an even-handed way.

However, we can never forget that equal treatment of all peoples is fundamental to our Canadian identity and, if we are going to retain it, then we have to realise that it’s not enough just to enshrine such values of equality in our Bill of Rights. It’s not enough just to hope that people and governments will act altruistically and compassionately. We have to go much further and much deeper than that. As a society and as individuals, we have to look with new eyes at people, especially those of different ethnic and religious and economic and social backgrounds, and see them as being equal to ourselves, flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, DNA of our DNA.

“Hath not a Jew eyes?” asked Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, as he pleaded the case for his people to be treated in the same way as others. “Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”³

If we are going to treat people equally in our society today, then we have to see them with different eyes. And that doesn’t just mean seeing people in general, as a group, but seeing specific individuals in our own community with new eyes. People like that homeless man outside the Brock Mission, or that Muslim woman walking along George Street, or that single mother collecting her welfare cheque. Seeing them as being nothing less than sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, our divinely created brothers and sisters, equally loved by a God whose Son went all the way to the Cross to show the depths of his Father’s love.

So, let us celebrate this Canada Day 2011 by laughing at ourselves, by listening to others, but most of all by committing ourselves anew to being a truly equal, just and caring society. Then, and then alone, we can be sure that our true Canadian identity will not slip away but will be the foundation of “the true north, strong and free” for many years to come.

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¹ Rebecca Connop Price, “I’m losing my Canadian English”, *The Globe and Mail*, June 20, 2011 www.theglobeandmail.com

² Mark 5:21-43

³ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene I