

June 8, 2020

Trinity Musings #18: Rev Brian Goodings (self-isolating and stewing in my office at Trinity United Church)

If you have walked or ridden a bike in the spring on the Georgian Trail near the Craighleith Heritage Depot, you will likely know about the beautiful corridor of lilac bushes that grow along this section of trail. They are a great nuisance to some of us with allergies, but their beautiful colours and fragrant blossoms are well worth having itchy eyes. When they are in full bloom it's really a magical place full of wonderful smells and bees and birds.

I was riding my bike home through this holy-lilac-passage last week when I came upon a woman who had already cut a basketball size bouquet of the flowers and she wasn't quite finished. Later, I passed more than a few people who had done the same thing and although I didn't say anything to them, I gave them my best stink-eye. I don't think they cared a whit. Since the flowers were growing on property that didn't belong to anyone, they felt free to take them. Never mind the rest of us.

The beauty of having public space, also known as a commons, is that it can be enjoyed by all. In the past, people grazed their animals on public lands and there was a shared expectation that nobody would abuse the privilege by taking more than their fair share. Apparently not everyone bought into the plan and some people brought larger herds than others. Soon the public pastures were overgrazed and this later became known as the tragedy of the commons. This term has been used to describe over usage or abuse of anything that isn't directly controlled or regulated and includes economies, oceans and the atmosphere too.

The assumption most of us hope is true, is that we share a loosely defined set of values, also known as common sense. The world religions and all ethics have a version of what some of us know as the Golden Rule. Put succinctly, "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to you." I would put it more bluntly...don't be a selfish jerk. It's really not that complicated. Some recent studies say

babies, even only a few weeks old, have a strong sense of right and wrong.

We shouldn't need to be told but the funny thing is that, most Canadians at least, obey regulations. If I simply posted a sign on the Georgian Trail that said "Please Don't Cut Any Flowers", most, but probably not all, would cease taking the lilacs. Case in point, there's a beautiful little creek and meadow near my house that has a "No Dumping" sign posted on a tree. Although it would be hard to imagine anyone seeing that creek and thinking it was ok to dump garbage there, a simple little sign has, for the most part, kept them from doing so. Crazy.

According to the literature, people treat any commons with more care and consideration if there are obvious and clear rules. The tragedy is that unregulated commons can be, and have been, desecrated by human greed and chosen ignorance. We have ruined or diminished much of what we should have been able to share.

We live much of our lives in shared spaces, or commons, and have been able to live fairly freely in these spaces until recently, when we were sent into isolation to keep the dreaded virus at bay. Now, as we carefully re-enter the commons, we need to agree how we will behave. Do we need to post signs or can we just generally agree to do what we think might be the best practices to keep others safe? Will we agree to do these things even if they inconvenience us? There has been a global pause in manufacturing and the air and water are cleaner than they have been for a very long time. Perhaps this is the time for the world to talk about trying to keep it that way?

There are some who clearly do not share a concern for the greater good and have made it clear they are NOT going to do anything that limits what they see as their god-given-right to do anything they please. They will not wear a mask; they will not keep a good distance from others; they will not ever get a vaccine; they will not believe any of the news because the whole Covid-thing is a hoax and conspiracy. They will not respect or share the commons in ways that respect others if it doesn't suit them- and it doesn't. Unfortunately (for me at least), a lot of these people belong to religious groups. As far as I am concerned, if we don't care for God and neighbours as much as we

do for ourselves, our faith is as misguided and annoying as a “noisy gong or clanging cymbal”. We can become the religious-wrong aka dangerous narcissistic twits. Look south if you want examples but there are plenty here too.

I'm not someone who likes a lot of rules but there is no longer much, if any, global capacity to allow for these kinds of self-serving behaviours. This virus has brought sudden awareness of our interconnectivity and the reality that the world itself is not ours alone but a commons we can share or destroy.

Do we really need to be told? Do we really need any more signs? Quit cutting the flowers.