

April 16, 2020

Trinity Musings: Rev Brian Goodings (self-isolating in my office at Trinity United Church: Collingwood)

So here's the thing. I've been thinking about the recent story I shared with you about the guy (not Guy) I'm now calling the "bird-man". If you didn't read that Musing, I was the innocent victim of a middle finger salute (aka flippin' the bird). I did mention that in my moment of indignant road rage I became my nastiest inner self, but I didn't tell you the thought that came to mind was... "HE ISN'T EVEN FROM HERE!"

In other words, "I have a right to be here but HE doesn't." I won't go into any physical descriptions but I think you might guess he didn't fit the typical look of "Thornburian". I don't just mean that he wasn't driving a truck and wearing a baseball cap. He was driving a very high-end car with a license plate holder bearing the name of a Toronto car dealership and...well...you know...he was different. He is probably, like many other people now appearing in our towns and grocery stores, one seeking refuge from the virus in a vacation home he or his family owns or is renting.

It's pretty tricky to say whether or not "they" have the right to be "up here" with "us". Some would say they don't...but I'm not sure I follow their logic. My son lives in a very nice house in Sauble Beach and a fire truck came down their street the other day with lights flashing and using a really loud speaker, telling people who aren't permanent residents to "Go Home!" These are big expensive houses and the municipalities are pretty happy to collect taxes from them all year long, so...can you have it both ways? Same thing is happening in places like Collingwood, Thornbury and Muskoka. We may not be using loud speakers but there is grumbling amongst the locals. Can anyone blame people from trying to find as safe a place as possible in a storm of any kind?

I'm not sure any of us do or would behave differently. All over the world and throughout history, people have fled from danger to find places of refuge. There are strong differences in scope and character of the people fleeing to this area as compared to say, Syrian refugees, but the intentions are similar. And so in some ways, is the response from the "locals" who suddenly have "strangers" in their midst. Not everyone appreciates the company.

The question is, who rightfully belongs and who doesn't? Every week at the beginning of our church service at Trinity United we acknowledge that we are living on lands formerly occupied by indigenous people who called this place Turtle Island. We thank God for the privilege of being here and sharing this land. We feel good about saying it.

But, I am always slightly uneasy with imagining how pleased the indigenous people might or might not be that I am here. We are, at this point in our history, just starting to work some of these issues out. It's likely going to take more than a few generations of really hard and costly work to do so fairly. All relationships between people attempting to share space are hard to keep harmonious and fair.

This is where I might sound a bit preachy but try to stay with me...in the three Abrahamic Traditions (Jews, Christians and Muslims all share Abraham as a common ancestor) neighbours and stranger are holy-categories of people. Strangers can give us as much grief as neighbours and to love and care for them is tough. It's one thing to say we love an invisible God but caring for other people is a heck of a lot harder. They are often SO annoyingly different from us. But we need to remember we or our children or our ancestors will have or will fit the category of "stranger".

Granted, it might be easier if the strangers in our midst were in need or asking for our help. It is harder to look kindly upon a person if they are tailgating us in a Lexus or butting in line at the liquor store. These are truly tests of patience and faith.

But, as my wise old mentor used to say to me when I was whining about something that didn't go my way, "Suck it up buttercup." The only thing in life we can control is our response to what happens and to welcome life with kindness, love and hope. That's it. And what goes around usually comes around anyway.

I do hope the bird-man is doing well. Maybe someone will be nice to him in a small-town-way that is surprising and welcoming. It'll probably be a Leafs fan. We know how to suffer and keep smiling no matter what. Good, in these trying times, for all of us to keep that in mind.