

Sunday July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017  
Canada Day Celebration

**PRAYER:** O God of all nations, we approach you out of gratitude and concern for our nation. As we reflect on its achievements, we are grateful that its heritage has become ours. We are grateful, too, for all who have laboured to shape it to your will.

Yet our gratitude for this heritage is matched by our concern for its perils. Pilot us, O God, through the treacherous waters that we might do as well by our descendants as our ancestors did by us.

We love to sing “God Keep Our Land”, in our national anthem, Lord help this call to you come true and make us willing participants in making this land a part of your will, as your will reigns in heaven. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** May we as Canadians, respond to the same call given to the Israelites long ago in 1 Chronicles 16:28, 29. “O people of all nations of the earth, ascribe great strength and glory to his name! Bring an offering and come before him.”

**PASTORAL PRAYER:**

O Lord of all lands and nations, we thank you for this beloved nation called Canada. When we think of our “home and native land” we are awestruck by its size and incredible beauty. Especially, on this special day we are thankful for those men and women who sacrificed much to build this nation, protect this nation and to help make this land prosper. We are well aware and eternally grateful that this country is so blessed. How we wish all people on this earth could enjoy the kind of life we have.

We wonder why you allow this fair land to grow and prosper while other more ancient lands seem to languish and falter. Then we remember that Jesus told us that, “To whomever much is given, much is expected.” Our richness, our freedom are gifts to be used to further the best interest of others. The poverty, oppression, violence that is perpetrated in other lands is our business, because it is your business. So, we thank you for this great blessing of Canada and we also pray that you would strengthen and guide us to fulfill the responsibilities such a blessing entails.

It is with some shame that we admit to you, O God that we constantly ask for your wisdom and counsel only to ignore it. We have squandered our resources and our opportunities for reducing the poverty, the violence, the drug addiction, in our own city. Far too often we have contented ourselves to the wringing of our hands and sitting back waiting for others to change things you have called us to address. How we have failed you by being preoccupied by our own rights, while ignoring basic human rights for others.

Awaken us and our nation, to our narrowness of vision and the hardness of our hearts. Arouse us to our oneness with all humanity; when we appeal to those in authorities over us, let us not forget those in misery who need us. As we celebrate those things that make this nation great and the envy of so much of the world, help us to make those ideals we value a reality for all people in our neighbourhoods. Mark us as your people, around the family table, the boardrooms, the marketplaces, and especially on the streets. May we leave every encounter with someone else a time marked by hope, love and reconciliation.

O Gracious God, of the whole earth, teach us to respect the people of other nations-who love their land as much as we love ours; for supporting their governments as much as we support ours; and for regarding their leaders as we regard ours. Give us the decency never to rejoice over the failure or fall of any nation-until at the same time we can pray for its transformation to a land of peace and justice.

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O Lord, we are an imperfect people in an imperfect land, in an imperfect world. Give us the vision to make the changes we must make, the strength to resist the changes that shouldn't be made, and the discernment to see those things that will harm us. Help us to join your allies in reconciling this world and again O lord we pray "Please keep our land, glorious and free" and more importantly make our land your land.

**BENEDICTION:** The God who made this world and everything in it, who gives to all peoples their life and breath, sends you into a world caressed by divine love. Remember that this God is not far from each of us; in this God, all persons live and move and have their being. May we be so humbled by God's love of us that we shall love one another.

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Matthew 10:40-42  
“What Defines us as a People?”

This is what Jeff Foxworthy (King of the Redneck jokes) had to say about Canadians at his recent appearance at Caesar’s Windsor. You may live in Canada if: If your local Dairy Queen is closed from September through May. It is in Brantford. **You may also live in Canada if:**

If someone in a Home Depot store offers you assistance and they don't work there. If you've worn shorts and a parka at the same time. If you've had a lengthy telephone conversation with someone who dialed a wrong number. If 'Vacation' means going anywhere South of Detroit for the weekend. If you measure distance in hours. If you know several people who have hit a deer more than once.

If you have switched from 'heat' to 'A/C' In the same day and back again. If you can drive 90 km/hr through 2 feet of snow during a raging blizzard without flinching. If you carry jumper cables in your car, and your wife knows how to use them. If you design your kid's Halloween costume to fit over a snowsuit. If the speed limit on the highway is 80 km, you're going 95 and everybody is passing you.

If driving is better in the winter because the potholes are filled with snow. If you know all 4 seasons: Almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction. If you have more miles on your snow blower than your car. If you find -2°F 'a little chilly'.

Perhaps I should have done a survey ahead of time, and I am sure many of you could have added to this list. One of the things that I have noticed that happens every July 1<sup>st</sup>, is a national exercise in navel gazing, as we all contemplate what it means to be a Canadian. Beyond all the natural resources, i.e.: maple syrup, and poutine, and let’s not forget hockey, we wonder; what defines us as Canadian? Unfortunately, most of the time the answer we get, is that we are not Americans.

In other words, we define ourselves by what we are not, as opposed to what we are. This search for identity is further complicated for those of us who seek to follow Jesus. For the most part, we want to be patriotic, but frankly, we want our patriotism to be tempered by our faith. For we have seen, especially south of the border, but elsewhere in the world as well, how fanatical patriotism is often confused, and melded in an unholy alliance with faith.

As an aside, it has always boggled my mind how many Christians somehow equate Jesus with very conservative political views. What we call the “Protestant work ethic”. The Jesus I encounter in the scriptures, would always align himself with the poor and dispossessed, and would be appalled by any talk of exclusion. The Jesus I know would never equate justice with revenge, and would always seek reconciliation.

Do you remember, one of those previously mentioned navel gazing exercises we Canadian’s had a few years back? It was a contest or rather a poll sponsored by the CBC, in which people were to vote on who they thought was the greatest Canadian ever. How Don Cherry got on the voting list is beyond me, but in the end, do you remember who won.

It was Tommy Douglas, founder of the CCF which is now the NDP and the father of our Medicare system. What most people fail to remember is that Tommy Douglas was a Baptist pastor in Saskatchewan before he went into politics. He was a graduate of McMaster, and was deeply disturbed by the crushing poverty medical bills brought to many of the families he served.

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I think of him often, not because of his political affiliation, but rather because of how his faith deeply influenced his thinking and political actions in regards to the poor.

Douglas is just one example of people all over the world, whose patriotism was influenced first and foremost by their deep Christian faith. Others we might think of include Germany's Bonhoeffer, and Britain's Wilberforce, Jimmy Carter, and countless others unknown to us. Our passage today is at the end of a very challenging chapter about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. What we might call the cost of discipleship.

Today, these three verses out of 42 verses, speak to the rewards we should expect in our representing Christ in a somewhat hostile world, and the rewards given to those who care and support Christ's ambassadors. However, as I think about this, I am becoming more and more aware that something is profoundly out of kilter in how the church's message, and its message bearers are received not only in Canada, but around the world.

And so, I wondered today, in light of our national observance, if it is possible that some of our ineffectiveness as a church, is the direct result of our putting national, cultural, or even personal preferences ahead of the call of the Gospel of Christ. In other words, how do I as a Canadian Christian, incarnate the Gospel in my community? In my pronouncements on all manner of social policy and matters of justice, whose agenda am I really following.

These are not idle questions, but in all seriousness, speak to the heart of what is wrong in the church, and how we answer them, determines whether we are reaching out to the world in grace or with exclusion and abuse. More and more, there is a disconnect between what the world, and Canadians specifically, are longing for from their Christian neighbours and what they receive. Criticism over the church being disingenuous, and hypocritical persist, all in an age of incredible spiritual hunger.

I am indebted to Rev. Cam Watts for forwarding me a letter written tongue-in-cheek by a small-town pastor, in response to Rev. Franklin Graham, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. His letter was written in response to some of Graham's message that he was dealing out on his Decision America Tour. I know it is from an American perspective, but it speaks I think to all of us. I also apologize because it is also a bit lengthy but it is very powerful

**Dear Frank:** Can I call you Frank? This is just pastor to pastor. Feel free to call me Peter. Anyway, I have to say I was flattered when I learned that your [Decision America Tour](#) took a detour off the beaten path to call upon us "small community churches." We are nothing if not small. We seat 30-40 on a good Sunday. And we are a century old fixture of our small community. Most often we are overlooked and overshadowed by mega-churches and politically influential religious voices like your own.

We don't hold a candle to an auditorium filled with the music of a one hundred voice choir led by professional musicians. We probably will never be recognized in any nationally syndicated media. After all, we don't do anything really "newsworthy." We just preach the good news of Jesus Christ; love one another the best we can (which sometimes isn't very well); feed the hungry that come to our doors; care for the sick; comfort the dying; and bury the dead. So, thanks for thinking of us. Rest assured, we are ready to respond to your calls to prayer and action.

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I have to say, though, that I was a little confused by your summons. Of all the things that worry me, loss of religious freedom for Christians in America isn't one of them. I can't say I have ever experienced anything in this country that could reasonably be called a restriction on my religious liberty, much less persecution.

When you started talking about attacks on Christianity, I thought you might have been referring to the racially motivated slaying of pastors and lay people at Mother Emmanuel church in Charleston some time back. Or I figured you were referring to the slaughter of Coptic Christians in Egypt this past Palm Sunday. That's what I call persecution. But having to pay a judgment for refusing to bake a cake for a same sex couple in violation of the law against discrimination? This you call persecution? There's a letter in the Bible, written by the Apostle Peter (ever heard of him?).

He's an expert on persecution, having been on the receiving end of it more than once. He says you don't get divine kudos from suffering the consequences of breaking the law-even if you are a Christian. Moreover, there is a Christian fellow named Paul (aka Saul) who wrote a letter to a church in Rome nearly two thousand years ago. He said that if your enemy is hungry you *should* feed him (that's in the Bible too). So, wouldn't it have been the Christian way to have baked a cake for the same sex couple in your example, even if you deem them enemies (another assertion I don't quite understand)? I'm confused.

But in any event, Frank, let's get over this persecution complex. Stop with the drama already! You are not under attack just because you have to follow the rules like everyone else. Look, I understand the owners of this establishment you mention in your speech don't approve of gay and lesbian people getting married. They don't have to approve of them. But if they are going to do business in this country, they have to follow the law against discrimination-just like the rest of us. If you don't like the rules, don't join the game. It's that simple.

Furthermore, I don't understand why baking a cake for people whose conduct you find personally offensive is such a big deal. Heck, Frank, if all of us small church pastors refused to bury everyone whose conduct we didn't approve of, the country would be ten feet deep in corpses!

I am struggling, too, with your claim that Donald Trump is a champion (albeit an unlikely one) for religious freedom. What freedoms are we talking about here, Frank? The freedom to lie with impunity? The freedom to grab young girls by the genitals? The freedom to discriminate against people of color in the sale and rental of real estate? The freedom to refer to women as "dogs," "fat pigs," and "ugly"?

The freedom to call your opponents "idiots," "losers," "liars" and "frauds"? The freedom to slander people with accusations of criminal conduct based on absolutely no evidence? By my count, the above violate at least four of the Ten Commandments (you will find those in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy-both in the Bible). If Donald Trump is the champion of American Christianity, God save it from its enemies!

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All kidding aside, you might be right about God putting Donald Trump in the White House—though your reasons for so believing are probably different from what I might conjecture. Still, how do you know that? Where did you get this info? I have to hand it to you, Frank, you sure do have the connections. As I am sure you know, God does not consult with us small church pastors on weighty issues of that kind. So, it was kind of you to leak this classified intelligence to all of us who are evidently a good deal further away from the divine pipeline.

So, let me see if I have this figured out correctly: God doesn't give a flying fruitcake if we deprive twenty-million people, most of them poor, of access to health care. Nor is God particularly concerned about how men treat women in the workplace, how people of color are treated in the real estate market, how the hungry and homeless are cared for (or not), but God flips out if we bake a cake for a same sex couple to celebrate their wedding? I have to be honest with you, Frank. I'm just not seeing it. Not in the Bible, not in the realm of rational common sense.

Here's the thing, Frank. At the last judgment, Jesus doesn't ask anyone about who they voted for, how many times they have been divorced, what their sexual history or orientation is or for whom they did or did not bake wedding cakes. His sole concern is for how we treated the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, those deemed "least" among us. No, I didn't get that from any private chat with God. We small church pastors have to rely on the Bible for our intel. I got this stuff from the Gospel of Matthew, 25<sup>th</sup> Chapter to be precise. As I said, that, too, is in the Bible. (It's a great book, Frank. You should read it sometime.)

You know, Frank, I would like to think that we are brothers. I would like to believe that we are on the same side. I would like to believe that, beneath our differences, we worship the same God and follow the same Savior. But quite honestly, I don't recognize the Jesus I learned from my parents, my Sunday School teachers, my pastors or my years of study and reflection on the Bible in your angry, fearful rhetoric. Yes, I will answer your call for prayer.

But I will be praying for the real victims of persecution—the victims of racial discrimination, sexual violence and bullying. I will answer your call to action. But I will be acting to establish health care as a right for all people; making the college campus and the workplace spaces where women and girls need not fear being called "pigs," "dogs" or "ugly" nor will they need to fear rich, white celebrity males who feel entitled to grab them by the genitals.

I will respond to your call for action by working for a society in which no one needs to worry about where she will sleep at night or where the next meal is coming from. You want prayer? You want action? You've got it.

Well, thanks again, Frank, for thinking about us small church folk. I appreciate your concern about our being persecuted and under attack. But don't worry about us. We don't have your money, your access to the halls of power or your seeming direct connection to the Almighty. But we have the scriptures, we have prayer, and we are learning every day what it means to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's all we need. You can keep your champion in the White House, thanks just the same.  
Christ's servant and yours, Peter.

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And lest we become smug thinking none of this applies to our Canadian sensibilities, perhaps we need a reality check. As a nation, we spend enormous amounts of time fixated on issues that are worldly important, but not important, I believe, in Jesus' eyes. Can I suggest that God has placed you and I in this town of Simcoe, in the country Canada, and at this time, to call our community to realign its focus? To call people everywhere to see their neighbours as Jesus sees them. To care about what Jesus cares about.

Perhaps the best way to celebrate Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday is to seek from the Lord his guidance in our efforts to make this a better place to live, work, and play. Perhaps we commit ourselves to holding our elected officials, and the civil service, to the standards we know Christ would want for us. Can we this Canada Day truly be salt and light? Let us set aside our collective angst over what it means to be Canadian. It may in some ways be a wasted exercise anyway.

Instead, let us focus on what it means to be Christ's followers who happen to have been placed in this great land Canada. To contemplate seriously how all the advantages we enjoy in Canada can be used to extend the grace and love of God. And so we pray, "God keep our land, glorious and free", but can we also add, "God keep our land one of: justice, generosity, and compassion to those inside our borders, no matter who they are, and those also who live outside them."