

Sunday June 13th, 2021

Luke 19:41-44

Series: "People We All Need in Our Lives"

Sermon: "We All Need a Place"

Nothing thrills me more than being out of doors, and catching a glimpse of some wildlife. If that wildlife is on the end of my hook, even better. Although I am not too enamored with raccoons or cotton tails eating my berry plants. On our vacation in 2014, Laura and I were enjoying a time around a camp fire one evening, at a local campground in Geraldton, when at dusk I saw something sail across between two trees. It was a flying squirrel, which I had never seen before with my own eyes. On that same trip we saw a huge otter who was quite annoyed as we walked by his pond.

In that same camp ground in Geraldton, we saw a raven that was so huge it would have given Edger Allen Poe nightmares, plus the largest roosting colony of turkey vultures I have ever seen, being annoyed by a bald eagle who was prowling around on the beach near their roosts. I just love seeing and observing wildlife, and before being called into ministry, I actually considered a career in biology. Specifically, a wildlife researcher.

And if I had an opportunity to go out tomorrow, and begin a wildlife research project, I would immediately head to the southern part of Africa and study the sengi. Never heard of them. That's too bad, because they are incredible, and no they are not a tribe of indigenous peoples.

Sengi is their true African name, but you might know them better as the elephant eared shrews or elephant shrews. People in Africa rarely notice them, because they are only about four inches long, but they are amazing little creatures. They get their name because their nose is and ears are like an elephant's. They actually have a trunk. In fact, biologically speaking, they are more closely related to elephants than shrews; which technically they are not.

Sengi spend their whole waking lives, creating, and maintaining a series of little trails in the grass, and they move along these trails at lightning speed. Their metabolism is so fast, they must constantly hunt for insects to get enough fuel. I further like them because they are monogamous, meaning they mate for life, and most often have one baby at a time. In fact, it may surprise you to learn that the female sengi's reproductive cycle is very similar to a human female, and that is a very rare thing outside of primates.

What I also appreciate is that these little adorable, four-inch creatures, never wanders from their home territory. It stays put, endlessly maintaining its trails, and only grabbing insects that wander into its system of trails. Even when threatened by predators, it will not leave. It only tries to confuse the predator by navigating its maze of trails. The Sengi love being at home, kind of like many of us. We too tend to like being at home.

Most animals, birds, and many species of sea life, have some sort of home territory. Not all, but most. Most creatures like to be in places where they can feel safe, raise their young, and find adequate food. Even bacteria, and fungi, look for ideal living conditions. And furthermore, some species defend their territories with considerable effort and aggression.

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Just try and take a wolverine's den from him, or the next time you are in the woods, and it's not winter time, and you see a series of claw marks about six feet up a tree, I suggest you make your way elsewhere.

Those are markers left by a bear. So, what about you and me? We've been exploring the people we need in our lives, but what about the need for a place in our lives. That place where we experience the highest level of belonging. That place where the smells, the sounds, the sights, the very air we breathe; renews us. A place with deep meaning, and deep connection to God, and those closest to us. Do you have such a place? Do you long for such a place?

Did you know that Jesus is recorded as weeping on only two occasions in the bible, although I suspect he did so more frequently? One time was when Lazarus his friend died, and seeing the mourners John writes simply "Jesus wept". The second time was when he looked over Jerusalem; a place. A place of significance. The location of the temple. He wept, because he knew it was soon to be destroyed and the temple razed to the ground.

A significant place that people were tied to, was about to be lost. If you don't think humans give significance to certain places then you are not paying attention. The whole concept behind a pilgrimage is going to a sacred place. We have watched in horror as in 2015, hundreds of people died in Mecca on the annual Haj pilgrimage. People are so hungry for a sacred place, they will travel hundreds of miles, when someone sees a water stain on a wall that reportedly looks like Jesus.

Why do people do this we wonder? Leonard Sweet suggests that perhaps it is because they are homeless. What he means by this, is not that you do not have a roof over your head, although it could mean that, but rather the restless nature of our modern society. We moderns, he suggests, are like vagrants or nomads. Our modern spirituality, especially new age religions, is homeless. The modern searcher is encouraged to transcend, or move beyond the physical.

To rely on oneself. What a load of rubbish! People are told time and time again to self-actualize. That we can be all that we can be with our hard work. That we can be victorious in this world in whatever we face. The bible is very clear, there is only one victor in this universe and that is God in Christ. If you are depending on yourself to be your own champion, you will be sorely disappointed.

Even in many homes in this county, and this neighborhood, our kids are homeless. Sure, they come to their stated residence from school, watch television, eat food, but they can't wait to get out of there. For many children, and especially teens, there is no deep meaning, or value where they lay their heads at night, and so they search for it out in the world. So, we can say with tongue in cheek, "the lights are on but nobody is home."

Without a sense of place, we chase cheap knockoffs. In our consumer driven society, people are tempted to think of malls, mega-box stores, and drive through restaurants as their place. Is it really? And this is more than just about real-estate. In our own country of Canada, we struggle to understand all the fuss our indigenous neighbours make about land. Ipperwash, Oka, and Caledonia: all are described as crises.

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We wonder why the government doesn't just buy out the land, but we fail to grasp that to a native person, land is sacred. It is not just a commodity to be traded or purchased. Actually, when I was thinking about this subject, I couldn't help but think of the Israelites and their forty-year wilderness sojourn.

Not only were the Israelites hungry and thirsty, they were also soul-sick. Without a place, they grumbled, they rebelled, and they became violent. At least in Egypt, they knew where they were and their place in the world. It was an awful existence being a slave, but it was still an identity in an identifiable place.

No number of quail, or manna, stopped it. Sure, their problems continued in the Promised Land, but it was still their land, their place, and they were prepared to defend it to the last person. Still are in modern Israel. Speaking of which, when you understand the significance of place, you begin to understand the heart of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. It is to our detriment; when we have failed to grasp that who we are is shaped by where we are.

Each locality has its own history, its own stories, its own rituals, and often its own dialect. In my home city of Brantford, there are actually two main streets. One main street going east through the downtown is called Colbourne Street. Parallel to it is another street going one way to the west, and its name is spelled DALHOUSIE. In most places the name is pronounced "dalhousee". But in Brantford it is "daloosie".

If I met someone from Newfoundland, I would know instantly where they are from, the moment they spoke. I read an interesting anecdote about a man who was traveling, and he asked a local man the following question, "Are there any important people who were born here?" To which the local man replied, "Naw! Just babies are born here." He is right. Whatever greatness a person has is almost certainly developed in the local environment from which they hailed.

I have noticed something that is becoming a very strong tendency in my mind and heart of late. When I travel to a new place, or go through a new place, and need to stop for a meal, I almost always want to try someplace local. Some place unique. Someplace with some local character, and hopefully a little local flavor. So, Laura and I look for that local restaurant with lots of cars around it, hoping that means good food.

If I choose, or am forced to choose a fast-food chain, I admit I get my fill of needed calories, but I do feel somewhat cheated. There is no adventure anymore going into a Tim Hortons. I know what they have, and what it tastes like right here in Simcoe and in Gravenhurst. It's good, but it's boring. What I long for is quirkiness. While in Wawa one summer we went to a local general store, which was clearly designed for tourists, but I didn't care.

It was quirky. It was entertaining, especially on a rainy day. It had the biggest dill pickles I have ever seen that you bought individually from a big barrel. No wonder that show on the food network is so popular. Have you seen "Dinner, Drive-ins and Dives" where the host Guy Fieri takes us to unique restaurants? I watch that and go, man I'd love to check that out when I ever get to that particular city. It is attractive, because it is quirky, unique.

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Do you have a place like that? That quirky place, where you experience the best of life. That place where love flows freely and readily? That place where you can't wait to get back to because it's home. Now here is when the other shoe drops in this subject. If we know the value of the local, how local is First Baptist Church? For us to be truly incarnating the life and faith of Christ we must demonstrate we are unique.

Paul described the church as the body of Christ, and he was referring to both the local and universal church. Calling the church, a body, is using an organic word. A word describing life and vitality. As someone who has pastored five congregations, and visited many others, I can tell you, that each body of believers I have encountered is unique. Each church has a unique history, a unique collection of people, and unique ways of doing things.

There may be some similarities, like in terms of theology and some practices, but each one is unique. But, shall we now confess that we are not always comfortable with our uniqueness. We are embarrassed by our quiriness. So, to compensate, we read books, or go to conferences to study how "more successful" churches are doing it, and we try to copy them. We may be tempted to become a sort of cookie cutter church, a branch office of a mega church.

And so, Sunday after Sunday people wander in, like homeless nomads. They worship and they go home fed, but like my experience at Tim Horton's, they are kind of disappointed. They were longing for our uniqueness to shine through. They wanted to catch a glimpse of that one thing, or often many things that separates us from everyone else. Not that we are better, but we are different. Frankly, not everyone will find our uniqueness attractive, but that doesn't mean we have to change from our quiriness.

If this is to be our sacred place, or rather at least one of them; if this is to be our home, then we must understand that it cannot be manufactured. It is organic remember. The living incarnation of Christ is flowing through us: creating, changing, empowering. Christ placed us in this community of Simcoe, to speak directly to this particular community about its needs, aspirations and challenges.

When people ask you about your church home, what do you say? I bet you would get a few raised eye brows if you replied, "Well, if I had to sum us up in one word, I would say we are quirky." They might reply, "What denomination is quirky?" They all should be, if they follow Jesus. And you wonder why, our old order Mennonite brethren garner so much interest and attention. They are quirky, unique.

Maybe this is why I am not a big fan of religious broadcasting, actually more specifically, televised worship services. I am sure the Holy Spirit uses such a medium to reach people, but the preacher on the screen doesn't know me, doesn't know my neighborhood, and doesn't even know my city in most cases. To me personally it is like going to McDonald's and expecting something from The Barrell, like their baked spaghetti; yum, yum.

And if you do not know what The Barrel is, that just shows you are not a local, or you are not fully acquainted with your neighbourhood. That there is still some quiriness out there left to explore and enjoy.

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If you wonder about the soundness of our being a unique fellowship, just read the New Testament and see how the churches all differed from each other. The Apostle Paul wrote unique things to each group and in unique ways. It is also important to understand that context means a great deal in understanding our uniqueness.

For example: Most of us are familiar with Martin Luther King Jr. speech “I have a Dream”. We especially remember the words, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty I’m free at last.” Powerful words, but King did not come up with these words in a vacuum. He was inspired by the Charles Tindley hymn “I shall Get Home Some Day.”

The first verse goes:

Beams of heaven as I go, through this wilderness below.

Guide my feet in peaceful ways, turn my midnight into days.

When in darkness, I would grope, faith always sees a star of hope.

And soon from all life’s grief and danger, I shall be free someday.

[Refrain]

I do not know how long ‘twill be, nor what the future holds for me,

But this I know, if Jesus leads, I shall get home someday.

What made King’s words so powerful was context. Words spoken in the cadence of the black church into the struggle of civil rights. What’s our unique context? I assure you we are in a different place than Tillsonburg. I assure you that you speak a different dialect than Thunder Bay. What has God given us to say into our community? What’s the good news for Simcoe? Where’s your sacred place?

Where has God placed you for such a time as this?