

Sermon: "Our Symbols"

Introduction

What are the symbols of your life?
What types of things say something about you?

Perhaps your family has a coat of arms
that has been handed down for generations.
Perhaps its a certain heirloom
that has been passed down much the same way.
Or perhaps its a new symbol
that has special meaning just to you,
like a wedding band or a specific pin or a tool.

Canada Day

Tomorrow is Canada Day
and, as a nation,
we have many symbols that represent who we are.
Things that say I am Canadian include
hockey sticks, beavers and Timbits, of course.
And then there is the maple leaf,
which we will see out in full force tomorrow, I'm sure.

The maple leaf is a powerful symbol.
It has been used to identify Canada since the 18th century,
long before the Canadian flag was thought of.
It is a symbol that has celebrated
the nature and environment of this great land.
But it was in 1965 that our current flag was adopted,
putting the maple leaf front and centre.
Designed by Jacques Saint-Cyr,
the Canadian flag uses the maple leaf,
along with the two official colours
proclaimed by King George back in 1921.
Those colours are red from Saint George's Cross
and white from the French royal emblem.

On February 15, 1965,
there was an official ceremony held in Ottawa
to inaugurate the new Canadian flag.

The speaker of the Senate said,
"The flag is the symbol of the nation's unity,

for it, beyond any doubt,
represents all citizens of Canada
without distinction of race, language, belief, or opinion."

And ever since that flag was first raised
to the singing of O Canada and God Save the Queen,
the maple leaf has meant a great deal
both in our country and abroad.

United Church Crest

As Christians,
we have many symbols
that are meaningful to us and our identity.

Just like the maple leaf screams "Canada",
symbols like the cross, bread and wine, and the Christ candle
scream "Christian".
And these Christian symbols are ancient.

And just as Canada felt it needed a flag to represent itself,
the United Church of Canada
felt that it needed a crest
to house some of the symbols
that were important to its faith.

In 1944,
Rev. Dr. Victor T. Mooney designed our original crest.
Often we take it for granted.
We don't take a lot of time to look at each of its parts.
But it is important.

We don't just use it because it's pretty
and we want something to fill space on our signs
and on our letterhead.
We continue to use it because it tells the story of our past
and the story of who we are today.

History

It's impossible to talk about our crest
without delving into our history as a church.
The United Church is still a baby as far as churches go.

We were born in 1925,
when three different denominations came together
to build something new.

The reading we heard from Ephesians
kind of captures the motivation of our church's founders.
It said this about Jesus:

"14For he is our peace;
in his flesh he has made both groups into one
and has broken down the dividing wall, that is,
the hostility between us.
15He has abolished the law
with its commandments and ordinances,
so that he might create in himself one new humanity
in place of the two,
thus making peace,
16and might reconcile both groups to God
in one body*
through the cross,
thus putting to death that hostility through it."

The creation of the United Church
broke down the dividing walls
and formed a new humanity -- one body--
so that we could all be one in Jesus.

Founding Churches

Symbols from each of our founding churches
are found on the crest.
The founding churches were
Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians
and they each brought with them
a strong faith and deep, meaningful symbols.

I invite you to take a look with me now
at the crest that's on the front of your bulletin.

First, find the open Bible.
Does anyone know which church that represents?
The Bible represents the Congregational Churches.
These churches emphasized that God's truth sets people free.
They saw this truth as coming directly from the scripture.

Next, let's find the dove.
Any guesses on which church the dove symbolizes?
The Methodists!
The dove often represents the Holy Spirit and its transforming power.
You might remember,
that it was the dove that came down to Jesus during his baptism.

This had been a distinctive mark of Methodism for a very long time.

And, what about the burning bush?

By process of elimination,
it represents the Presbyterians.

The burning bush is talked about in the book of Exodus
when the bush burned but was not consumed, right before Moses' eyes.
This was a symbol of Presbyterianism,
used to represent the indestructibility of the church.

Now, in the last quadrant,
you will see the symbols alpha and omega.
Anyone who has studied Greek will know
that they are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.
They symbolize God being the first and the last in all creation.
Alpha and omega are mentioned in the Book of Revelation.

Greek Symbols

There are lots of other symbols hidden in our crest.
For instance, did you notice that the crest itself is the shape of a fish?
The fish was what the early Christians used to identify themselves.
Now, you might think that this was because
Jesus hung out with fishermen and used fish in his storytelling.
Actually, it has to do with the Greek word for fish.
You see, the initials of the words "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour"
spell out fish in Greek.

And the X at the centre?
X is the first letter of the Greek word for Christ.

Who knew so many symbols could be contained in one little crest?

That All May Be One

When you take all of these symbols from all of these different traditions
and pull them together,
you end up with one crest that represents one church.
It's like a family;
it has many unique and distinct members
who also have a lot in common.
That unity is front and centre on our crest
with the Latin phrase which means "That all may be one."
This, of course, comes from the John reading we heard this morning.
Jesus' desire was that all may be one through him.

The new aboriginal symbols that were just incorporated into our crest
follow this desire.
We spoke about them a bit earlier

with the different colours representing different directions
and the phrase "All My Relations" emphasizing unity.
These are important additions to our crest
which carry with them great meaning
that also have quite a history.
All of these symbols represent something of the past
but, when we bring them together, we give them new meaning too.

Conclusion

These are perhaps not the symbols that we would use in our every day lives.
But they are packed with meaning.
And when we want to represent our Christian identity,
we know that behind these symbols lies the story of who we are as a church.

So, as we reflect on this new crest of ours,
take a look at it one more time.
Is there anything you notice that you might not have noticed before?
Is there a particular symbol that you feel drawn in this moment?
What might that symbol mean for you?

I want to invite you to hold on to that symbol -
to ponder its meaning, to think about why it connects with you.
Maybe put it beside the symbols you thought of earlier
-- the ones that represent your life.
After all, we each have many symbols
that represent different parts of who we are.
Its almost like we could bring them together
to form our own crest -
the crest of our lives.

We ask God to bless our symbols, to help us to hold them close.
May we always find ways to imagine our story.
May we always find images to help us understand who we are.
May we always have be able to articulate these powerful realities.