

“Feeding Sheep”

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I know that many of you watched the Vancouver Winter Olympics this last February. I watched as much of them as my time would allow, and there were many exciting and entertaining moments for me. But of all the things that made the Vancouver Olympics memorable, I think it was the opening ceremony that I enjoyed the most. Part of the ceremony gave tribute to the first people of Canada, the native people who developed a distinctive culture of totems and music and religion that will always be part of not just the Canadians legacy, but a part of the legacy of the rest of North America as well.

As I watched the opening ceremonies, I was transported back to the summer of 1976. That summer, I worked as a volunteer in mission with the Presbyterian Church in southeast Alaska. My job was to travel to logging camps and native villages in Southeast Alaska to plan and

lead vacation bible school for the children in the camps and villages. As a person who was heading for seminary and planning on the ordained ministry as my career, I was also encouraged to offer worship services on Sunday mornings and to provide other ministerial services as time and opportunity allowed. It was my first opportunity to function in the role of a pastor – and was I ever excited. In the weeks before my job started, I prepared sermons, planned lessons, and developed ideas for much more than just vacation bible school. I was ready to feed the people in the camps and villages of southeast Alaska with a gospel feast that they would never forget.

My first stop was at a logging camp called Port Alice where I stayed for two weeks. I was assigned a bunk in the bunkhouse with the loggers. And it didn't take me very long to discover that I was in a different world from anything I had ever known before. To say that the language in the bunkhouse was rude and crude is an understatement. The loggers worked from sunrise to sunset, and when they came back

from their work in the forest, they were so tired that most of them wanted to sleep. Their work was stressful, demanding, and dangerous, and it was a rare day when the loggers came back without an injury, or near death experience to share.

Most of my work was with the wives and the children of the support staff and logging company executives. They were used to having church workers like me come in and were pretty set in the stories they liked to hear and the activities they enjoyed doing. Most of my carefully constructed plans went flying out the window, or were drastically redesigned as I learned more about the people of the camp.

Rather than doing the feeding, it didn't take me long to realize that I was the one being fed. I ate my meals in the camp cookhouse, and I don't think I've ever sat down to a bigger spread of delicious, homemade food than what was put on the table for the loggers. I was taken out on trips into the forest with the logging executives and given an education about the logging industry

and forest preservation that was a real eye opener. I listened to many stories from loggers who had left their families behind in distant places in order to follow the work, of friends being with you one day, and gone the next, of fears about what the future of logging would be and what a logger would do when his body was too old or too injured to keep working. I was also taught how to fish for halibut and invited to join in times of recreation and fun on the day of the week when the logging operation was stopped. I shared my life and my faith with the men, women, and children of the logging camp. But I was enriched by the stories of their experiences in the logging camp and forests in Alaska, much more than they were enriched by mine. And I was blessed to be included in their times of worship, and fellowship and prayer.

My second stop was in the native village of Kasaan. It wasn't really a village. There was a boat dock. There were two families that lived there, each with four children. They lived in mobile homes that were badly weathered. Only footpaths through the beach grass and devil's

club connected the houses together. There was a school where I was given a place on the floor to roll out my sleeping bag. There was a hose that provided water for me to use for cooking and cleaning, and that also provided an opening for mice to enter into the schoolhouse at night. Every night I was there, I was sure I would wake up with a mouse in bed with me. There was no electricity, no television, only a short wave, battery operated radio that connected these families with the outside world.

When I arrived in the village, I noticed a path that led from the buildings out into the cedar forest. I asked the families there where the trail led, and they said that in the afternoon, after vacation bible school, they would show me.

When the children came for VBS the next day, I discovered that none of them could really read. All of them had very short attention spans. And all of my careful plans and preparation had to be changed on the spur of the moment. We did much more singing, and much more playing,

and lots more bible story telling and acting than what I had initially planned. But we had fun.

In the afternoon, the father of one of the families and the leader of the village came and suggested we walk down the trail, into the forest. It was a rare, sunny day. The light filtered down through the tall cedar, hemlock, and spruce trees of the forest. The air was heavy with the scent of fir trees. We wandered by a rapidly flowing stream for about an hour. Every once in a while, the path would break through the trees and we would have a view of the inland passage where whales breached and splashed in the water and where eagles soared, and occasionally plummeted into the water to catch a hapless salmon. After a good half hour more, we were back into the depth of the forest. But suddenly I noticed more than trees surrounding me. There, interspersed among the trees of the forest were tall, soaring totem poles. I started to count them, and there were more than fifty. I noticed that they were grouped in a circle and in the middle of the circle was a ceremonial house,

painted in the red and black totemic designs of the Tlingit people.

“Where did these come from?” I asked my host. “You didn’t make all these, did you?” It was much more than any man could have created by himself.

“No, these are the totems from the old village of Kasaan. That village has been gone for many years now. It was located across the bay from where we are. In its day it was one of the largest of the Tlingit villages with the biggest number of totems than any other village. My mother and father were born there and when they were young, miners and trappers and missionaries came into the village. They brought many things with them that made our lives easier, tools, and weapons, and education, and religion. But they also brought some things that made life much more difficult – like alcohol, and measles, and small pox, and religion. An epidemic of measles and small pox swept through the village and killed almost everyone. The loss of life was so great, that the few survivors, including my

parents, abandoned the village. About twenty years ago, the descendants and relatives of the survivors decided we needed to preserve what was left of the old village, and we decided it was better to move the totems and the ceremonial house to a new location. And that's why they're here – and that's why I'm here. My family is the caretaker and protector of our peoples' heritage.

Each afternoon for the rest of the week, I hiked out to the totem village with my host who explained the different designs to me, who told me the legends of raven and eagle, who explained the clan system of the Tlingit people, and many of their customs. In his words I heard a reverence for the creation and for the interdependence of all living creatures that connected quite naturally with my own Christian faith and with the way I believe Jesus would want us to live. He fed me a feast, not only of Tlingit culture and custom, but taught me, also, about forgiveness, and reconciliation, and new beginnings.

My last stop that summer was the longest. For three weeks I stayed in the native village of Kake. Kake was actually a fairly large town with an actual Presbyterian church, a couple of grocery stores, some

government buildings and a separate grade school and high school. I stayed with a family that had thirteen children, all with first names that began with the letter “M.” For the first two weeks, we held vacation bible school and had as many as fifty village children coming to our program. On Sunday mornings, I would hold church service at the church and had about twenty people attend. The people who attended the services were very polite and appreciative and respectful, making sure that I would be the first to go through the line at the potluck meal that followed the service.

I quickly made friends with an older gentleman, who was no longer able to fish or hold down a permanent job. One afternoon I was walking through the town and saw him sitting outside on the porch of his house. I waved at him and he invited me to come and sit with him for a while. His wife served us tea and brought us a plate filled with smoked salmon and freshly dried seaweed. I loved the fish and found the seaweed to be much more palatable than I had thought it might be.

During the course of our conversation, he shared that he had enjoyed my talk the last Sunday, but he wondered if I believed everything in the Bible just as it was written. “Well, there are some things that I

question, and I can't explain how they happened?  
Why do you ask?"

He said, "When I was a boy, I became a Christian. A Presbyterian missionary came to our village and told us about the god of the Bible, the great chief on high, who, with love, created the Tlingits as well as all the other people of the world, and many people in my family joined the church. He told us about a missionary friend of his who had a young Tlingit girl who acted as an interpreter for him. One day, after several months of interpreting, she came and said to him that even though she knew he was a good and wise man, there were some of his teachings that were not right for her people.

"Can you give me an example?" he asked with curiosity.

"One of your favorite stories about God is about the good shepherd who went out into the mountains to rescue his sheep that were lost. You like to say, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures ...' But it doesn't sound right to tell the people that. I cannot say it so that it will sound right. Tlingits don't know about these pet sheep you tell them about. They only know about the wild mountain sheep, and they do not

want a shepherd. They leap and run if they see a man. A wild mountain sheep can kill a wolf. The people will think me foolish if I tell them the great Chief-on-high will take care of them as a shepherd takes care of the wild mountain sheep!”

Another time, when the missionary was preaching about the great flood, and how the windows of heaven opened and the water poured out for forty days and forty nights, covering the whole world, the girl stopped translating his words. Thinking she had not understood, he repeated them again, and was surprised when she still refused to translate. “Don’t you understand? It rained for forty days and forty nights and the water covered the earth?”

“I cannot translate that,” the girl said bravely. “If I do, my people will not respect your Bible. It has often rained much more than forty days and forty nights among us and no waters have covered the earth.”

The man I was visiting took a sip of his tea and a bite of seaweed, and didn’t say anything more than that. His point was perfectly clear to me. If I was ever going to be good at feeding sheep, I needed to, first of all know the sheep I was trying to feed and

then I needed to be sure that the food I offered was helpful and needed and understandable.

The summer of 1976 was a life changing summer for me. It was a summer in which I was steeped in the culture and the customs of Native American people. I discovered that there is much to learn about life, about faith, about God from people whose experience in the world is much different from mine. I learned that in feeding God's sheep, I must be ready to be fed myself, to receive from them the unique gifts and incredible insights they have to offer and share, and that in the process of giving and receiving our wisdom and friendship, there will be the greatest blessing and the richest of love. These lessons have been reinforced again and again for me through the years of my ministry as I've had occasion to interact with other native tribes in the different places where God has called me into ministry.

Today, we celebrate the presence and the ministry of Native American people in the United Methodist Church. I rejoice in their wisdom and celebrate the connection in Christ that we share. Amen.