

Rural Life

May 5th, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our Creator, Amen.

I want to begin this morning by sharing a photo. Could we please have the photo posted? Does anyone know what this is? This is a baby prong horned antelope. A new baby fawn. Has anyone ever seen one of these little fawns before?

In the background, you'll see the big wheels of a tractor. This photo was taken by a Saskatchewan farmer on the land in the spring- just a couple of years ago. This photo tells us a few things about the farmer who took it. First, he was really paying attention. You have to be very astute to see a little brown fawn like this on a brown field from up in a tractor that big. Second, he is a friend to the fawn- you can see that he got down off the tractor, walked quietly over to the little antelope, got down low, careful not to scare her- and was able to take this wonderful photo. Third, this photo expresses love. This farmer took care to share the photo, to help others to see the beauty and the miracles that surround him, to express his love and respect for the creatures on the land that he works.

I grew up on a dairy farm, and I remember my grandfather used to feed the calves and when he would pour the big buckets of milk out, he would always let the cats drink- he knew all the cats, all the mothers and their kittens and which ones were the best hunters. He was very observant and concerned about them. He was a friend to the barn cats.

If I was home from school for some reason, and I went out to the barn in the daytime when it was quiet and milking was over, He would be there brushing the cows' tails and talking to them. He loved the animals. Farmers love their land and their animals. They know them, and they are in a very special relationship to them, a deep friendship.

Over and over throughout the scriptures, these qualities, to know and to love, are the qualities that are attributed to God to describe God's relationship to us. Think of the stories of the lost sheep in Matthew and Luke where the shepherd leaves the flock to look for the animal that is missing- because he sees that it is gone and he cares about it. It reminds me of my dad getting up in the night to check on the cows who were calving in the field- or going out on the four-wheeler to look for a lost calf. Think of the story about the fig tree in Luke- when the person wants to cut it down because it's not bearing fruit, but the gardener saves it, gives it another chance, fertilizes it, waits for it to grow better. This reminds us of all the farmers who have been through bad years- but always keep hope alive and say – *next year will be better...*

Or in John 15, just preceding today's gospel when Jesus says, *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener*. Any gardeners here today? Do you love your garden? The gardener loves the garden.

- **God's love for us, and God's friendship and care for each of us, can be compared to the love that the farmer, the gardener, the shepherd – has for the land, the plants and the animals.**

- Today is Rural life Sunday in the United Church of Canada. Today we celebrate and we give thanks to God for all the people in our church who live in rural areas, and who are connected to God's sacred creation in close friendship.

Here at McClure, of course, today we offer special prayers of gratitude for our friendship with rural partners in Radville and Carlyle. Rural life Sunday, is a day to call us back to where we all came from- because at some point- we all lived off the land.

Jesus did not *have to* celebrate Rural life Sunday- because Jesus was in rural ministry most of the time. His ministry took place on the land, in the fields, on country roads, and on fishing boats. Probably bake sales as well- but it just didn't make it into the gospels.

The gospel message today according to John is a part of a longer passage that begins, *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener*. It's the passage that teaches that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. That when we are connected to the vine, we are connected to the gardener- who is God. And that's the context of our gospel today, when Jesus says:

*As the Father has loved me,
so, I have loved you; abide in my love
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
You are my friends
I do not call you servants any longer,
but I have called you friends, -*

To be connected to God, is to be people of love and friendship. They will know us by our love. And what better examples of love and friendship do we have than our neighbours caring for land and animals and one another in rural areas. I'll give you an example...

In 2019, in the years following the death of Colton Boushie and the Gerald Stanley trial, at a time when accessing land was becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous for Indigenous people, in Saskatchewan, when our friendships, especially in our rural communities were deeply troubled, some farmers and ranchers gathered together. They sought to better understand their responsibilities as Treaty people as friends and neighbours, and they resolved to work toward restoring safe land access for Indigenous People as Treaties intended.

Remember that when this land was settled, the treaty agreement was not a bill of sale- but promise to share in a spirit of friendship. In the summer of 2020, with a ceremony organized by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner and led by Elder Ross Gardypie, The **Treaty Land Sharing Network** was born. **Treaty Land Sharing Network**. Since then, the network has grown to include 52 locations and 37,000 acres across Treaty 4 and Treaty 6. The Treaty Land Sharing Network is a group of farmers, ranchers, and other landholders who have come together to begin the crucial work of honouring Treaties. In the spirit of sharing the land, they welcome First Nations and Métis people to access the land that they farm to practice their way of life.

– Angela Roque, Anishnabek Nation Treaty Authority said of the project-

"The Treaty Land Sharing Network has not only opened access to privately held land, it has opened a possibility to build respectful and positive relationships based on the Treaty principles of mutual respect and mutual benefit."

As a farm kid- this initiative fills my heart with joy. Farmers and ranchers showing us all how love and friendship can and should be expressed and lived out. As the mother of Indigenous children, someone who has Indigenous members in my family, this makes me hopeful. It gives me hope for the deep reconciliation and healing that we need here- especially in rural areas, on farm lands, on

reserve lands, and the healing that will mean my children are safe – as they explore this beautiful earth that belongs to all of us.

But most of all, this project uplifts my heart as a Christian and as a member of the United Church. because I know that many of those first farmers and ranchers at the table, were members of the United Church. That for them, the ones who are friends to the prong horned antelope and the barn cats, those who pray for rain, who are connected to God in a bond of love and friendship, have been inspired by the Spirit of Christ in this project- because it embodies the great commandment That we love one another.

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So on this Rural Life Sunday, we worship a God who loves us, as a farmer loves her fields. We honour our rural roots, we celebrate our rural partners. We thank God for all the farmers, first nations, ranchers and gardeners who show us how to love our land and to love one another. And we ask God to help us all find inspiration, find tangible ways to express love and live in friendship in our own lives.

And finally, I want to leave you with the words of a poem by Wendell Berry- He's 89 years old and farms in Kentucky.

*Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.
Amen.*

<https://treatylandsharingnetwork.ca/about/>

Rev. Emily Carr