

# Named and Claimed

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Carly and I were in the interior of British Columbia a few years ago, driving a rental car through the Lillooet Valley on our way to visit some incredible hot springs we had heard about. We stopped to pick up two men who were hitchhiking a ride across town, a common practice in that more remote area, where there is no public transit. Our ride together was probably only about 10 or 15 minutes, but we shared introductions and made a little small talk. The two men were part of the Lil'wat First Nation and had lived their whole lives in the area, and so were pointing out a few local landmarks. At one point, the older of the two men pointed out the window at the snowy mountain peak that stood out above everything and said, "that's called Mount Currie." His younger companion scowled, elbowed him in the side and said, "That's white man's talk! That mountain is called Tz'sil!! Turns out Mount Currie takes its name from John Currie, who was the first non-indigenous settler in that area in the 1880's.

It's not only mountains out west that have a lot to tell us if we pay attention to their names. Take Lake Ontario. For the longest time, I thought it got its name because it was in the province of Ontario. Not so! It is known to the Haudenosaunee people as "Ohnatario," which means "good lake," or "handsome lake," and in the Huron-Wendat language as "Ontare," or "Lake of Shining Waters." It's the province that takes its name from the lake.

In indigenous languages, places are almost never named after people. They have their own proper names. So the lake and the mountain are not "named after" anything or anyone. They are not just lifeless features of the landscape to have labels slapped on them, changed from "Air Canada Centre" to "Scotiabank Arena" as a matter of business. Tz'sil is the mountain's first name. "Ohnatario" is the lake's first name. Not "Lake Ohnatario," just "Ohanatario."

When the land and water have names, people can address them directly. Try walking up to the lake one day and addressing it that way, calling it by its name. I've done it. It feels strange, outside my cultural conditioning. But maybe with time it will come to feel less strange, and I can start to see the lake as a subject, and not just an object. Maybe if we talked to the lake that way, we wouldn't think of it as a place to dump sewage.

As Martin Shaw says, “Not talking about a place, but with a place.”

The name “Toronto,” is a Mohawk word, which means “where there are trees standing in the water.” This refers actually to the sight of wooden poles placed in the water to make traps for fish, and originally meant an area further north of here, closer to Orillia, but eventually came to be applied to the whole region, including what is now the city of Toronto. One thing this tells us is that the waters in and around Toronto used to be a highly productive and desirable place to catch fish. There used to be a commercial salmon fishing operation right here in what’s now the GTA about 150 years ago. The name Toronto tells us something about what this place was, and could be again. The place where the trees stand in the water, on the shores of the Lake of Shining Waters. Handsome Lake.

These clues to what has been, and what could yet be, are literally all around us. Every time I take the GO train from Hamilton to Toronto, I hear the recorded voice say, “next stop Mimico,” which is two stops before getting to Union Station. Mimico is an Anishnaabe word, which means “abundant with wild pigeons,” referring to the passenger pigeon, which used to fly overhead in countless millions, in flocks that would darken the sky for days. As many of you know, they were hunted to extinction in the late 19th century. Next stop, Mimico. Abundant with wild pigeons.

Sometimes the clues to the beauty and richness of this land are hidden in tongues that very few of us know how to speak. But sometimes they’re not. Take Oakville, for example. Upon a moment’s reflection, it shouldn’t be surprising that it was once a place defined by forests of oak trees. The oak trees were subsequently decimated by the ship making industry set up there, among other things, and later gave way to housing. As the saying goes, “A suburb is a place where they cut down the trees and name the streets after them.” Sometimes they name the whole town after them.

But I don’t mean to pick on Oakville. And I don’t mean to take cheap shots at the place that anyone calls home. I live in Hamilton after all, so that could go downhill fast. And I also don’t mean to just paint a bleak picture of what has been lost. What I mean to say is that we have a choice of whether to see the places we live as just a backdrop to human activity, or to let the land tell us a story about itself, a story that might make us uncomfortable, but might also open up possibilities we could never dream of on our own.

Martin Shaw refers to this as “getting claimed.” In his words, to “become that part of the land that temporarily abides in human form.” It’s not a feeling or an experience that easily fits within a modern, rational view of the world, but if any part of you resonates with you, I invite you to try it on. Think of it as poetry. Feel what it does to you to imagine yourself as part of the dream of the land, rather than just an inhabitant. It seems like an experience that is harder to have in the middle of a major city, rather than out in the country or the forest, but I don’t think it’s out of reach.

And because it's Canada Day weekend, I got to wondering this: what if, on that famous voyage in 1534, Jacques Cartier hadn't planted a cross in the ground at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, and claimed the land around for the king of France? What if instead, he had allowed himself to be claimed by the beauty and power of the land, and by the relationship between the land and the people already living there? What if those who followed him did the same thing? How would things be different now? How would the history of our country be different? How would we be different?

I'll tell one more story to take us back to our own place and time, or at least pretty close. In 2006, there were plans to widen Bronte road in, you may have guessed it, Oakville. The plans called for cutting down one of the namesake oak trees, an elder that had stood watch for over 250 years, before the city was ever built. After a public outcry, an alternate plan was drafted which would spare the oak tree, but cost more than \$300,000 beyond what the city had allocated. After initial fundraising efforts were sluggish, Meagan McLellan, a successful local businesswoman, stepped in and offered to match donations up to \$150,000. The short version of the story is that word got out – Prince Charles even got involved somehow – and donations poured in from as far away as India. They saved the oak, although Meagan McLellan's role wasn't known until her death in 2013, when she was revealed as the anonymous donor.

So she had a lot of money, that's a given. But she could have done any number of other things with it – surely there is no shortage of worthy causes in a hurting world. Causes much bigger and grander than a single tree, however beautiful. According to a friend, she had a deep love of trees, especially oak trees. But why put forth \$150,000 to save this tree, this solitary survivor standing next to a road in Southern Ontario? Some would call her decision sentimental, romantic, not the kind of effective, evidence-based action we need to solve our pressing global problems. I would say it's exactly what we need – to feel the ancient roots sink deep in our hearts and not let go. I didn't know Meagan McLellan, but I would venture to say that she got claimed. Claimed by an old oak tree standing over a road. Blessed be, and amen.