

Mothers' Day 2016

Fire and Home

Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Even as late as Friday morning on my bike ride to work, I thought I knew what I was going to say on this Mothers' Day. But then there's reality, there's life—it breaks in and takes over, as it should, and I knew I had to connect with you over the catastrophe that's fallen on the people of Fort McMurray, Alberta, this past week; a catastrophe of nature that has up-ended and wreaked havoc on the lives of 90,000 people: families, individuals, women, men and children—a whole city and neighbouring towns; the consequences of which will be felt for years and years to come.

I will confess that there were days last week when my thoughts and feelings went to some dark, troubling and uncharitable places. First, there was just the overwhelming awe at the scope and devastation of the fires that have essentially obliterated a whole Canadian city in a neighbouring Province, and my thoughts reckoned that Nature just doesn't give a toss about us. I can't call Nature cruel—that would be to project consciousness and intent on something that is beyond human categories. Nature just is—sometimes seemingly benevolent, other times supremely harsh and devastating in its manifestations.

In the past few days, (I can't help it!)—I've also thought about climate change and our unconscious, irresponsible contribution, by commission and omission, to global warming. And then, though I'm embarrassed to say it—(I'm not a nice person): I thought about Fort McMurray as a resource extraction, boom and bust town, the ground zero for Canadian tar sands, and of the malign slide of this nation—aided and abetted by government and industry—from a relatively

robust, diverse manufacturing nation into a warped petro-state with all its attendant negative consequences.

I thought and felt these things; and then I started to read and hear the stories: tales of human panic and flight, irretrievable loss, families in temporary, ad hoc shelters, lives reduced to what could be stuffed hastily in a garbage bag or thrown into the back of car, homes and businesses burnt to ground—and who knows how the trauma of any of this—lives, livelihoods, community and homes—can ever be re-knit, recovered and re-built?

And here I am, here we are, safe and relatively secure, for the moment, in this place of beauty and in a city untouched by the catastrophes of Nature. How grateful we should be that the angel of destruction has so far passed us by—not that we deserve some special dispensation or favour, for Nature knows nothing of dessert: the sun rises on the evil and the good, and sends rain (or not) on the just and the unjust, as it was said with time-won, life-won insight two thousand years ago.

Along with the human stories that are coming forward in the media, it was an opinion piece in the May 5th *Globe and Mail* that gave me a shake and roused me from bleak and not-so-charitable thoughts. Todd Hirsch reminded me that the Fort McMurray fires are not about the tar sands industry, or a frontier town jerry built with little rational planning, or stock valuation and oil prices, or emergency preparedness on the municipal all the way up to the federal level. What the fires have burnt away for all to see is what the economy is all about—and that's home.

Think about the word: *economy*—its roots go back all the way back to ancient Greece and the word *oikos* which means a house, or home; and *nomos* which means to deal out, to distribute. All economy begins in the home, homes large or small, humble and grand; and its goods—the tangible and concrete things, and those imperceptible to touch, but even more real

and dear—our memories, relationships, emotions, history—all these are the goods of the home. Economy begins and takes place when those goods have an abode, a shelter and people who share them out as needs present themselves and are addressed as best we can; as children, companions, friends and community present themselves for sustenance, care, connection and love. And do I need to say on this day, that mothers have played a principal, essential role in the thoughtful distribution and sharing out of goods of our many households; they always have and will, and there would be no economy of any kind without them.

That said, there's also no economy without a home, a place, a shelter—and that's what Todd Hirsch reminded me to think about—"that is what all eyes in Alberta and Canada are glued to at the moment," he wrote "—homes being burned, homes being lost, and the homes of strangers being opened....Residents of nearby towns and cities in northern Alberta have opened their homes, their mosques, their churches and their recreation centres to provide shelter.. "Because without a home," he writes, "we are as vulnerable as kittens."

Over the coming weeks, there will be the inevitable calculations of the economic costs of the Fort McMurray fires; there will be finger pointing, assessments about rational fire management and beefed up evacuation plans for the next time.

But for now.... home is one of those non-negotiable things that grounds us as humans. Listening to numerous stories—like that of the parents of a two-year old and 14 week-old baby, forced to flee their home an the panicked calculus about what to save and what to leave behind—we know that surviving in this world without a home is supremely hard, and that without one, we lose our centre of gravity. Though I lived in a tent in a state park with my spouse and two toddlers, we knew it was temporary; and we hadn't lost all our earthly goods. What's happened in Fort McMurray—to all its residents and the surrounding environment—is beyond my

imagination. Something that is within the reach of my mind and imagination is that the fiery furnace in northern Alberta reminds us that the economics of the home and the lives of those who dwell within them are what really matters. It shouldn't take a catastrophe to carry this lesson home.

All things and lives under the cope of heaven are fleetingly temporal; and by the reckoning of implacable nature they and we will pass away in the blink of an eye. All the more reason to hold dear and value this one and precious life, those few tangible things of enduring meaning to us, and, above all, to hold dear and sustain those we love to the very end.

There will be a retiring collection at the end of this service to provide funds and resources to the Canadian Red Cross for fire evacuees. Today, we can make cash contributions or write out a cheque to the Canadian Red Cross. As well, we can go to www.redcross.ca and make a contribution on-line; I've checked the website, and it's very clear there what to do. Our donations are tax-deductible.

But before we call our children and begin our Mother's Day Flower Communion, a moment to re-gather us in commemoration of this day. It's strange: even as grow into my autumn years, I've not forgotten my mom, dead now for almost three decades. So for her, and all our mothers: those child-bearing, exasperating, caring, long-suffering, extraordinary ordinary women: a poem by May Sarton, *For My Mother*...written when May Sarton was almost eighty:

For My Mother (May Sarton, *Coming on Eighty*)

Once more
I summon you
Out of the past
With poignant love,
You who nourished the poet
And the lover.
I see your gray eyes
Looking out to sea
In those Rockport summers,
Keeping a distance
Within the closeness
Which was never intrusive
Opening out
Into the world.
And what I remember
Is how we laughed
Till we cried
Swept into merriment
Especially when times were hard.
And what I remember
Is how you never stopped creating
And how people sent me
Dresses you had designed
With rich embroidery
In brilliant colors
Because they could not bear
To give them away
Or cast them aside.
I summon you now
Not to think of
The ceaseless battle
With pain and ill health,
The frailty and the anguish.
No, today I remember
The creator,
The lion-hearted.