

**Sunday, June 6, 2021 | Celebrating the Ministry of Lumsden Beach Camp
With Vicki Nelson, Executive Director, Lumsden Beach Camp**

Reflection: Living Soil, Living Skies. What is growing at Lumsden Beach Camp?

Sometimes I am a lazy gardener. I build my beds in boxes, up, away from the stones and weeds. I buy my soil in bags. I am impatient to nurture and heal poor soil. When I hear this parable I think, “how rustic and old timey... tossing seeds right onto the ground, I would never be careless. I plant in that good soil.”

But then at the end of the verse, my stained-glass ears are cracked when Jesus quotes Isaiah—“ever hearing and never understanding”. Messages and lessons landing on my path and being gobbled up by the birds.

But I must have been having a good soil moment when pondering how I wanted to share about Lumsden Beach Camp and its ministry when this parable floated into my life.

Before we dig in to today’s readings (pun intended), I want to provide some context to Lumsden Beach Camp or LBC for folks who do not yet know it well.

Our camp is western Canada’s oldest camp. I think we are the second oldest United Church camp in the country. This camp has roots. Since I have been the executive director I am always shocked when people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them, and they are like, “Oh, I know LBC. I went there as a kid.” Or “I used to cook out there” or “my niece went there in the 1980s”. We aren’t a big camp, but we are consistent. Like an iceberg—above the surface you can see a couple hundred people who attend or work at the camp during any given year, but below LBC has thousands of alumni, supporters, and fans. It is actually pretty humbling to be a part of. I also love its gigantic-ness because it is nearly all awesome. Our camp’s reputation is pretty stellar. Organizations want to work with us, people from a wide range of backgrounds send their kids to us, we often have to send talented young people away who want to work with us because there is so much interest. AND what’s more, this reputation is so positive without

requiring too much tending. We aren't like a big, flashy organization who control the message, follow strict style guidelines or dictate what our young staff can say or do.

Instead LBC is built anew each year with a combination of traditions and new learning. We celebrate our awesome leaders. We encourage diversity of background and opinions in our campers and their families. We strive to be more welcoming. More inclusive. More justice focused. Better at building independence and resilience. So yes, things are always changing and getting better, but like a iceberg it is big and you may not notice the difference.

Obviously we are in the middle (hopefully closer to the end) of a pandemic and like every other aspect of life, camp has changed also. Last summer and this one, we are offering Day Camps. While independence and identity building happens best when kids can completely escape their regular life at home, we believe that being at camp—even just for 6 or 7 hours each day for a week—still has a lot of value. Like my online yoga teacher always says, even in small doses we are absorbing the nutrients of that practice. Kids are still being silly, finding sacred outdoor spaces to explore, they are learning to work as a team, campers wipe-out and get back up, they make new friends and learn ridiculous skits. The nutrients of camp—the practice of being in community—are being absorbed.

Speaking of nutrients, let's talk about soil. Soil truly is the medium for life. We build our cities and homes on soil. We make our way through the world on dusty paths or concrete roads. We grow our food in soil.

I, like many of you I suspect, live in a city because many of our siblings around the globe still steward and sow. We all have agrarian roots, but for many of us we can't see that far backwards. The parable we heard read is often called Parable of the Sower or Parable of the Soil.

So, what soil do you come from? Take a second and think about that.

The United Church of Canada comes from Methodist Soil. It comes from the rocky soils of Scotland's Presbyterian tradition. It comes from peat and loamy soil of the Congregationalist church in Wales and England. And like all Christian churches our roots travel back to the limestone and terra Rosa of the Holy Land.

What soil do YOU come from?

I come from right here. Rich soil, sometimes too dry, but perfect for grazing buffalo, for sod houses, for slowly (and sometimes too quickly) expanding agriculture. I come from heavy clay—gumbo of Regina. With leaky basements and hand-planted trees. I come from tilled soil, but also rock strewn native prairie being held together by roots of ancient grasses.

If you can, share what soil you come from in the chat.

We are recipients, stewards, trustees of soil. It is the medium in which we are nourished. It is home to worms, grubs, bacteria that makes all of this possible. We also fight over soil over territory. We colonize soil. So much of it, holy land. We claim deeds and titles, and put up borders. But in the end, the soil is our heritage, our womb it nurtures us.

In the parable we hear of 3 types of soil. The path, the rocky soil, the good soil.

And as good Christians, we don't want to spend time in the rocky soil, where life is hard. We want that good soil! We want our efforts to bear fruit. And when I was first reading this parable I was like, "Yeah! Lumsden Beach Camp is the good soil. Kids find themselves on our land and in our community. The spring up! They bear fruit!"

And while that is true. The more important soil in this story is rocky. It is marginal land where things struggle to grow, where there aren't a ton of nutrients to absorb or where the impenetrable rock is close to the surface that putting in roots is a challenge. Jesus loved

hanging out in the margins with the marginalized. His ministry wasn't focused on good soil people—the healthy, happy, wealthy and wise. Naw, Jesus was with the poor, the ill, the alienated, the hated—hanging out in that rocky soil.

If truth be told, a lot of the kids we welcome to LBC are probably good soil people. What I mean by that is campers who hold a lot of inborn privilege. Many of our campers are white, middle class, English speaking, children who are comfortable in a camp setting. But, we actively welcome kids that are coming from rocky places too. These kids may suffer from anxiety, or bullying. Their families may be low income or a bit chaotic. They could be new to Canada or from an Indigenous community that rightly feels nervous in church spaces, especially residential ones. Kids from rocky places may be hesitant to step foot into a camp—a culture very far outside their own experience or comfort.

Like Marcus. Marcus—not his real name—came to LBC last summer for the first time. I don't know him well, only having quick moments to chat at daily drop off and pick up times. On the surface he seems like Good Soil. Cute kid, loving family, raised in the church, outgoing and clever. After his first week at LBC, Marcus signed up for a second later in the summer, which is always an indication we are doing something right. Good soil kid, found good soil at camp to nourish him. Open and shut case. Success.

At the end of the season though one of LBC's leaders added more to my conception of Marcus. Even though he was in grade 7, he had never come to camp before. He had told this leader it was because he is gay and worried how he would be received and treated. The pandemic eliminated overnights, so day camps made a camp option feel safer. So he tried it out. He was genuinely himself and was received with love and laughter. The way I pray every kid is when they come through our gates.

During his second week at LBC Marcus opened up even further. Sharing with the whole camp his Indigenous roots and hoop dancing at the talent show. While preparing to dance, he was nervous and so found a quiet

space and smudged his hoops, chatting away with his leader (which is how we found out he about his pre-camp nervousness). Sitting in the grass, smudging, he choked up telling them how important his days at LBC had been. How much fun he was having. How great this community is. Then he did his hoop dance, got a standing ovation, and beamed. Marcus is already signed up for day camps again this year.

Even good soil has some rocks. Even healthy, happy kids, have rocky moments, have doubts, want to belong worry that it won't happen.

And sometimes soil is so devoid of nutrients that it needs to be rehabilitated. How do you make soil healthy again? Compost! Banana peels, lawn clippings, apple cores, all of it is tossed together so that from our waste and consumption, new life nutrients can emerge. In truth, even healthy soils can be depleted. This natural process of recycling needs to be a part of our gardens, our lives, and our ministries.

At LBC we want to be the compost. We want to add nourishment to all our campers, to our leaders, to the people who volunteer countless hours. When anyone joins our community we want it to be a safe space where they can shed that thick skin they walk around in—the one they use to try to protect themselves from their peers, overwhelming demands at school, from disconnected parents or challenging sibling relationships. At Lumsden beach camp, we want people to feel safe enough to drop those skins, that peel, the rough bits, into our compost pile. We envision a week of tending and self-esteem building. Days full of new challenges, successes, and a pitch fork turning and mixing. The dream is that the compost—full of bacteria, heat, worms, and moisture—transforms those heavy things into rich, dark, nourishment. Campers get to soak it up, grow a bit, and head back into the world feeling replenished, feeling more

whole.

And this process should feel familiar to all of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, because this composting process is not so unlike resurrection. Letting parts of ourselves die to bring forward new life. In a compost pile those bacteria and fungus, beetles and worms use their amazing bodies and God-given gifts to transform leftovers, excess, death into God's good news. Into good soil. They do the work of restoration and reconciliation.

LBC wants to be worms. We want to humbly level the inequalities of the diversity of people who come our way. Sometimes that work is slow and takes summer after summer, but our camps' culture, our goals, our leaders are all nibbling away, transforming death, demise, darkness into something new. Completely different. Life giving and affirming.

This compost—community, acceptance, unconditional belonging—combined with the rain, sun, and hot Saskatchewan winds makes campers and young leaders more resilient. Not unlike the Saskatchewan ritual of taking your seedlings out during the day, and back in at night during the spring, camp makes kids more hardy and robust, so as they grow and face a world of challenges, they have already been nourished, seen, challenged and treasured—they have been hardened off. More prepared to sink their roots deeper and flourish.

Even though Jesus could impart a lot with a solid parable, I am realizing that I should probably drop this garden metaphor soon, but it is so apt and rich. So bear with me as I shift it slightly. Lumsden Beach Camp is also a community garden. It belongs to you. I have the privilege of checking on it, making sure the water is turned on in the spring, pulling up grasses at the edge. But truly nothing grows here without the support—financial, volunteer hours and more—of hundreds of visionary, faith-filled gardeners like yourselves. I want to express deep gratitude to Knox-Metropolitan United Church who contributes funds monthly to Lumsden Beach Camp as a sustaining congregation, and to individuals in this community who make donations. Thank you. I also want to invite everyone to join me in supporting the camp consistently, allowing for LBC's

leadership to plant bulbs in the fall and till in the spring hoping and trusting—meaning your monthly gifts through PAR allows us to confidently dream big and make plans.

Grab a sun hat and sink your hands into this earth, this soil. Embrace this United Church community that already counts you among its gardeners and tenders. Let's work together to nurture the rocky places, spread compost on everyone, and build resilience and new life.

Because in life, and death, and life beyond death, God is with us.

We are not alone. Thanks be to God.