HOW FAR DOES LOVE REACH?

JEREMIAH 29:1-7; LUKE 10:25-37
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JUNE 28, 2015/5TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Welcome to our first Sunday of our summer schedule. Next week we will be beginning a summer series on "The Footsteps of Jesus." We will be paying attention not just to the things that Jesus *says* in the gospels, but to the things that he *does*. Each week will be devoted to a different action of Jesus and how these actions embody the gospel.

But for today's sermon, I wanted to reflect a bit on my recent trip to Ottawa for the final event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and to Chicago for the NAIITS Theological Symposium.

I know that some of you have expressed an interest in this trip, and I wanted to do a "report" of some kind before the memories recede too far into the rearview mirror.

May 31-June 3 in Ottawa marked the official closing ceremonies of a six-year national process involving seven thousand witnesses and over thirteen hundred hours of testimony from across the country. All of it was based on the testimony of indigenous people who were forced to attend Indian Residential Schools.

I was part of a group of Mennonite pastors, students, and leaders that were present in Ottawa. For three days, we listened to speeches, attended readings and lectures, listened to stories, and participated in other activities to mark the end of this important process.

The high point of the event was the final report produced. The seven-year process culminated in 94 recommendations presented in Ottawa, for change in policies, programs and more generally the "way we talk to, and about, each other."

The “truth” that was told and formalized in the final report book at this event was hard to hear.

Over a hundred years or so, approximately 150 000 indigenous kids were taken from their homes and their families and placed in church and government run boarding schools, often at great distances from their homes.

They were forbidden from speaking their languages, and separated from siblings leading to feelings of isolation, profound loneliness, and disorientation.

They were sometimes abused (physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually). They were told that they were “savages” who needed to be “civilized.” They were the subjects of medical experiments. They were often malnourished, mistreated, and generally looked at as primitive peoples to be assimilated into the broader (whiter) culture.

The attempt was “to get rid of the Indian problem, to “kill the Indian in the child,” as one official once put it.

In his final remarks, Justice Murray Sinclair attached a term to this: Cultural genocide.

The effects were devastating. Over 6000 children died, either at the schools or in attempts to get away. Sometimes parents weren’t even notified until much later. Generations of kids grew up without parents, never learned how to parent.

Many broken people—kids and parents—coped with the pain and the disorientation in the only way they knew how, through substance abuse. And the effects of this have spiraled down to the present, with indigenous people being overwhelmingly over-represented on virtually every negative social index there is.

One of the most heartbreaking indictments of these schools that I have ever heard came from a middle-aged woman who said, simply: “We never learned how to love or to be loved.”

This is part of Canada’s story.

From Ottawa, it was off to the Chicago area. Here where we spent three days reflecting theologically upon the issue of reconciliation. We were about a hundred or so people—some indigenous, some non-indigenous, some American, some Canadian, but all seeking to locate our own cultural moment with all of its challenges in the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Among the many memorable presentations here was one by Adrian Jacobs, a public educator, a pastor, a member of the Cayuga First Nation in Ontario.

Jacobs said that as human beings, and *particularly* as those belonging to the dominant culture, we have always seemed to need a "savage" to define ourselves against—an "other" that is brutal, evil, and less human than we are.

In Canada, indigenous people have often been thrust into this role.

But we see this phenomenon across cultures, through history, right down into the present. We need only glance at our newspapers for confirmation.

In Charleston, SC we have seen that racism is alive and well in the USA. Dylan Roof apparently considered black Americans as "savages."

We read of Islamist attacks on beaches in Tunisia, or at factories in France, or the seemingly endless acts of inexplicable violence in places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan… And we think… "savages."

The list could go on and on. It could span the entire globe and cover all of human history.

As human beings, we have always struggled to live with *the other.* So often, our approach to difference has been justify and protect ourselves by demonizing "those other people," those *savages*.

And the effects of this human tendency have been as tragic as they have been widespread.

Which brings us to the two passages of Scripture we've heard this morning.

The first comes from the prophet Jeremiah, and is a letter written to a group of Jewish exiles who find themselves in a strange land, among unclean, impure "foreigners."

And what does the prophet Jeremiah counsel these people? Just hunker down and keep yourselves from being contaminated by those "savage" Babylonians?

No.

What he tells them is to "seek the peace of the city in which you find yourselves."

These are shocking words. They would have been shocking words to hear for a people who had always understood themselves as God's chosen people in *contrast* to the surrounding nations who were godless, immoral, and wicked, and with whom they were to have *nothing* to do.

Samuel Wells describes the Israelites' mindset when it came to Babylon:

> Babylon, to an Israelite... was the end of the world. Babylon was the epitome of death, pain, guilt, and isolation. **Death**, because it seemed the dream of the Promised Land had died. **Pain**, because anyone who planned a renaissance for the Jews was going to be in big trouble. **Guilt**, because exile was a tragedy Israel had brought upon itself. And **isolation**, because Israel was like a teaspoon of sugar, and Babylon was like a huge cup of tea inexorably dissolving each granule until there was nothing left.[1]

And to these people with this mindset, Jeremiah says, "seek the peace and prosperity of the city… Settle down… plant gardens… Get married… Pray to the Lord for this city. *Because if Babylon prospers, you will prosper*."

It's a remarkable advice for a people who had always understood themselves as separate from "those people."

Jeremiah brings us part of the way. Jeremiah urges the weary and beaten-down exiles to set aside their disdain for the Babylonians, to seek the welfare of the city because their own well-being was bound up in the broader whole.

But Jeremiah's words still leave the people seeking the welfare of the city for their *own* sake. Their concern for others is an extension of our care for themselves.

In our second text, Jesus pushes us further. Much further.

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[1] Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), 28.

Jesus is approached by an "expert in the law" who wants to know what he has to do to inherit eternal life.

"What do you think?" Jesus asks him. "How do you read the law? You're the 'expert,' after all!"

The scholar dutifully recites the twin commands to love God and neighbour that form the heart of the Jewish law.

"Sounds good," Jesus says. "Go do that."

But he wanted to justify himself, Luke says… So he says, "and who, exactly, is my neighbour?"

We know the rest of the story. Jesus doesn't answer his question, but tells him a story with a hated Samaritan showing a bunch of good religious Jews what love of neighbour looks like in action.

So, what do these texts have to say to us, in light of Canada's history, in light of global realities, in light of our persistent human tendency to struggle with difference?

Well, for starters, they force us to begin to chip away at the walls that we so easily build and maintain between each other.

They force us to see that Jesus will not tolerate our self-justifying categorizations of "the other."

Every time we find ourselves saying things like,

1. Well, yes, but *those people* are just inherently lazy…
2. You don't seem [*my group*] whining for extra rights….
3. I got where I am through hard work… Nobody *gave* me anything!
4. *Those people* are just different… We have to be careful with them
5. There's only so much you can do for *those people* anyway

Any time we find ourselves with these kinds of words on our lips or in our minds, we can be sure that we can count Jesus among our opponents.

Any time we are finding reasons for why our care and concern doesn't need to extend to *those people*, we are aligning ourselves with the "expert" in the law that came to Jesus looking to justify himself, to secure his own eternal status, and to draw boundaries around the group of people that he had to concern himself with.

We are standing before Jesus asking, *How far, really, do I have to go with this whole "love your neighbour" thing?*

Because that's really going on with the expert in the law, isn't it? The question, *And who is my neighbour?* is a different way of saying, *How far does love have to reach?*

And Jesus shows him exactly how far. But not in the way he expected. Instead of drawing the boundaries around all the people that had to be squeezed into love's reach, Jesus showed him what neighbour love looked like.

And he showed him what it looked like by casting a guy from about the most undesirable category of people that the expert in the law could think of in the starring role.

A Samaritan. A dirty half-breed. An unclean idolater. A dog. A *savage*.

This *savage* shows the righteous, pure, Bible scholar how far love reaches. He tends to a wounded man on the side of the road—a man who was ignored by a whole host of respectable religious people.

It's interesting what the Samaritan *doesn't* do, *doesn't* say.

He doesn't encounter the man on the side of the road and inquire about the circumstances that led to him being there.

He doesn't say, "Well, what on earth were you doing on such a dangerous road in the first place?! How could you be so thoughtless?"

He doesn't say, "You know, you people are always getting yourselves in such bad situations!"

He doesn't probe and interrogate the wounded man, demanding that he prove that his suffering is innocent, that he had no role in the circumstances he has arrived in, or anything like that.

He sees a man bleeding on the side of the road, and he tends to his wounds.

And he goes beyond this, ensuring that the man will be cared for at his own expense even after he has gone.

That's what a neighbour looks like, Jesus says. That's how far love reaches.

Having said all this, the easiest thing in the world is to have a sermon end on a moralizing note.

Here's the problem, here's how you/we need to do better, now let's go out and do better for Jesus!

But telling people to do better for Jesus is rarely very productive.

And a sermon should not be a "how to make Canada or the world better" manual, but the proclamation of *good news*.

The truth is, I don't know how to fix the problem.

It's easy to look at the situation in Canada with our toxic history of Residential Schools and our present reality and think, "it's hopeless."

It's easy to cast a glance south of the border and observe the troubled race relations made plain by Charleston and the numerous killings of black teens and think, "how on earth do we fix that?"

It's easy to look at the fear and suspicions that fuel Islamophobia around the world and think, "there's no way out of this."

There's so much that we don't know, so much that seems impossible to fix.

But there is one thing that I am absolutely convinced of.

As individual followers of Jesus and as the church who is called to be his presence in the world, we are faced with the same two choices that the expert in the law faced:

1. Will we concern ourselves with probing the limits of how far love has to reach, finding excuses for why we can stop here or there, telling ourselves that there isn't much that can be done for *those people* anyway?
2. Or, will we commit ourselves to acting like neighbours to all of those around us, whatever their colour, whatever their creed, whatever their history, whatever their present, whatever their future.

Will the reach of our love extend as far as that of our Saviour?

And not because the culture tells us to, or because the Truth and Reconciliation Commission produced a report, or because the verdict of social media has been rendered, or because the government changes its policies or any other thing.

But because this is what we should have been about all along, as people who follow a Saviour like Jesus!

And the good news is that we are the people that love has included in its reach.

This is really good news.

God, in Christ, has seen us bleeding on the side of the road, and has reached out to us, tended our wounds, forgiven us, restored us at great personal cost, and set us on the path to healing and wholeness.

And we, who have been loved like this, can only respond by imitating this love to neighbours around us…

Whether these neighbours are the indigenous peoples of Canada…

Whether these neighbours are right now huddled in a refugee camp on the borders of Syria…

Whether these neighbours are the person across the fence…

How far does love reach?

It reaches across enemy lines and invites to see how our own welfare is bound up with the welfare of others.

It reaches across designations like “savage” or “those people” and invites us to see neighbours where we once saw problems.

It reaches as far as it took for God, in Christ, to reach out to us, when were broken and bleeding on the side of the road.

How far does love reach?

As far as it takes.

Amen.