WALK IN A GOOD WAY

MICAH 4:1-4; LUKE 10:25-37
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Well, we are in week three of our "love your neighbour as yourself" tour. ☺ This week, we're looking at indigenous issues.

The worship resources suggested examining the history of North American colonialism, deconstructing the Doctrine of Discovery (the idea that European settlers "discovered" this land when, in fact, it had long been inhabited by indigenous people), looking at the Truth and Reconciliation and its adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

These are good things to learn and valuable things to study. If you are interested in learning more about these issues, please talk to me. I can point you in the direction of all kinds of resources. Or explore Mennonite Church Canada's Common Word website. This, too, is an excellent place to go if you're looking to learn more about the history of what has led to the current reality in Canada.

But as I thought about how I might approach this topic today, it occurred to me that I have talked a lot about "indigenous issues" over the last six years. I've talked about the history of residential schools. I've talked about the theology. I've talked about events that I've traveled to and things that I've learned.

And the more I've talked about this issue, or *any* "issue," and the more I've observed some of the problems in our city, the more I've encountered attitudes toward indigenous people among fellow citizens, neighbours and friends that remain toxic, the more I've become convinced that "positions" on "issues" are rarely very helpful.

What we need are stories. What we need are faces and names and histories and laughter and tears and pain and hope to help us truly see one another as what we are: neighbours.

Not "problems to solve," although there certainly are problems to be solved. Why, for example, are roughly 40% of the people I see at the soup kitchen when our church serves there, indigenous? Why does the chaplain at the jail tell me that over 60% of the inmates are indigenous?

Not "political issues," although political decisions are necessary and obviously have deep effects upon people's lives.

Not crime statistics or objects of pity or charity.

But *people*.

Human beings with stories and histories and contexts that formed them, *just as our contexts have formed us*.

If we don't see our neighbours—indigenous or otherwise— as people like us with stories and histories and struggles that we often can scarcely comprehend, it won't matter what political changes are made or what policies are implemented. We will never be bound together for our common good and we will never live out the good news of the gospel in its fullness.

So, today I'm just going to tell a story. It's a story that I have shared before in writing but one that I return to often.

It's a hard story.

It's also a story that has a few glimmers of hope. But only a few.

It's a story that, I hope, will help chip away at our tendency—and I feel it, too!—to reduce people to categories and abstractions rather than neighbours to whom we owe a debt of love.

This story happened four years ago here in Lethbridge. I'm just going to tell it as I experienced it, and then offer a few brief reflections from the two passages of Scripture that we have heard today.

The names have, obviously, been changed in the interests of privacy.

"I met a woman at the soup kitchen last week, and she was wondering if you would be able to come and pray for her and her husband sometime." The call came from Anne Martens. I think it was a Tuesday afternoon.

The woman's name was Sandy and her husband Leroy was struggling with dementia, she said. He needed prayers for healing.

I gulped and said, "OK, I will go." I was more than a little apprehensive. Do they think I am a magician? Are they expecting a priest? What will I say? How will I pray? And so on.

But, whatever my misgivings about what I might or might not encounter during this visit, the fact that I should go was never in doubt. And so, off we went.

It was a kind of run-down looking apartment. When we entered there were a group of people sitting in the living room while the country music station loudly blared from the TV in the corner. Introductions were made, and then people slowly started to trickle out.

"You're gonna pray for Leroy, right?" one of them said. "I am," I replied. "You're welcome to stay and join us." He grinned, and said, "Nah, I pray my own way, by myself…"

"Those are my street brothers." The voice came from a little old man who had come tottering into the living room. It was Leroy. Actually, he wasn't very old at all, I would discover. Only 49. But he looked far older than that.

To say that the years had not been kind would be the height of understatement. His body was thin and frail, his long black hair hanging over stooped shoulders and heavily bruised arms. He had few remaining teeth and a nose that had been broken many times. The knobby knees and stick legs emerging out from under his shorts revealed numerous scars. His movements were painfully slow.

He slumped down on the couch looking like one of the most defeated human beings I have ever met.

Sandy sat down beside him. She, too, was thin. She, too, was quite obviously well acquainted with the harsher side of life.

We began to talk, and gradually a painful story began to emerge. Leroy's parents had died when he was 12. He had spent a bit of time in a residential school, but he didn't like that, and kept trying to run away. After his parents died, he went to a white foster family.

"They didn't like me," he said. "They beat me. So I ran away. I been living on the streets since I was 16."

The story got worse. We heard of near-death experiences, of crippling addiction to alcohol and drugs, of a long train of broken relationships, of kids and grandkids that he rarely saw.

We heard that Leroy had recently been forgetting things, seeing dark visions, wandering aimlessly around the house, confused, at all hours of the night. "I don't know how to help him anymore," Sandy said.

She looked at him. He looked down.

He mumbled, "Sometimes she gets angry at me when I forget stuff." She looked out the window, a tear falling down her cheek.

I looked at the walls in the room we were sitting in. There were pictures of Mary and Jesus alongside Bible verses in calligraphy with lace borders. There was a poster advertising a Pow-Wow on the local reserve that must have been at least five years old.

There was also a picture of a basketball team, with a strong, happy-looking black-haired young man front and centre. Beside the picture were some awards and plaques: "Most improved player." "Honours student." "Player of the month." And beside these, an obituary.

I swallowed hard. “Is this your son?” Sandy nodded. “What happened,” I asked, inwardly bracing for the response I knew was coming.

“He hung himself,” Sandy said. She looked out the window again. This time, there were far more tears.

What does one say in the face of such sadness? What could we do but pray?

I sat down on a rickety chair with a pair of socks hanging on the back, moved aside the coffee table with the Calgary Flames towel draped over it, and joined hands with Leroy and Sandy and pleaded for mercy to the God who said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” to the suffering God well-acquainted with sorrow and rejection.

We prayed for healing, for peace, for strength, for any kind of goodness and joy to find its way into all this pain and confusion.

We prayed that God would banish the “dark spirits” that Leroy had been encountering in his night-time walks. We prayed that the doctors could help uncloud Leroy’s mind.

We thanked God for Leroy’s faith, even in the midst of a life of struggle (“Yeah, amen!” Leroy mumbled at this point).

We prayed for some shred of hope and light for these two dear people so well acquainted with darkness and despair.

And then, we said goodbye and walked out into the glorious sunshine of a spring day. Leroy and Sandy’s friends had just returned.

One of them, Paul, took me aside. He was wondering if I could help him out. He had just moved here, he said, to take care of his three kids. His wife was an addict and had just been sent to jail. “Just a bit for groceries,” he said. “Until I get back on my feet.”

I asked to hear more of his story. He told me about how his parents were always drunk and never around…. About running away… About the white family that took him in and “taught me a lotta good stuff.”

He told me about his time in the residential school, about being dragged around by his ears until they bled.

I told him how very sorry I was that the church bearing Jesus' name had been involved in this.

"It's OK," he said. "I don't blame the church…. I'm not sure we would have been any better if we were the ones in power… I dunno… power… it does something to people."

He paused. Then he pulled up his sleeve to show me his tattoo. It was a buffalo skull over a medicine wheel, with a cross and feathers superimposed on it. "I believe in God," he said. "The four colours of the medicine wheel, they're kinda like the four directions of Jesus' cross."

I smiled and nodded.

"You know," he said, "I think if we all just realized that we're the same, that none of us are any better than the others, we could fix a lotta stuff."

He might have said, "I think if we all just realized that we're neighbours, we could fix a lotta stuff…"

Over the last six years, I've had a lot of opportunities to be in spaces across Canada where conversation between indigenous and non-indigenous people takes place.

I've heard a lot of hard stories like the one I just shared.

Often, after sitting with stories like this, the indigenous people I encounter in various settings will say something like, "We need to learn how to walk in a good way with each other."

We need to walk in a good way… with each other.

Both passages this morning talk about walking in a particular way.

Micah 4:1-4 gives us the big picture, the horizon of hope that we are walking, sometimes lurching and stumbling, sometimes even retreating from.

A vision of *all* people streaming to the mountain of the Lord.

A vision of peace between people. Swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

No more physical violence, which is good.

But also, I think, no more of the forms of violence that are equally destructive. No more demonizing and misunderstanding and mudslinging and stereotyping. No more complacency and false superiority. No more lazy judgments upon those who bear God's image. No false sense of superiority that barely recognizes or acknowledges that we did nothing to earn many of the advantages we have enjoyed.

No more fear (Micah 4:4).

No more young boys having to make their way in the world alone, no more abuse and abandonment and an inherited history that makes it virtually impossible to flourish.

No more dark spirits that torment in the night.

> He will teach us his ways,
> so that we may walk in his paths…

We will all, finally learn what it is to walk in a good way.

Micah 4 gives us our true north as followers of Jesus. A vision of hope, healing, peace, and justice for *all* and of a God who is the only trustworthy judge.

Luke 10 is an "in-the-meantime" passage.

As we anticipate and long for the vision of Micah 4, how ought we to live?

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 a neighbour looks like in action.

Luke 10 reminds us that Jesus has a very large category of “neighbour.” Larger than ours, usually.

Every time we find ourselves saying things like,

1. Well, yes, but *those people* are just lazy…
2. You don’t see [*my group*] whining for extra rights…
3. I got where I am through hard work… Nobody *gave* me anything!
4. They’re just so *different…*

Any time we find ourselves with these kinds of words on our lips or in our minds, Jesus firmly and patiently begins the story again:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers…

He will talk about good religious people passing by…

He will say, *But a* ***Samaritan*** (which is Jesus’ way of saying, “a member of the group of people that you think the least of”) *saw him and took pity on him…”*

And he will end with, *“Go and do likewise.”*

He will say, “Yes, I know there are political issues… I know people have to take responsibility for themselves… I know that it’s not easy to know the best way forward as countries and cities.

But the way forward as neighbours is not so hard. You can bring a cup of cold water. You can weep with those who weep. You can bear witness.

You can stand *with* and speak *up*. You can refuse to treat people as issues. You can pray.

It's interesting what the Samaritan in the story *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, "You know, you people are always getting yourselves in such bad situations!"

He doesn't say, "You know, you've got some bad theology that we need to get sorted out."

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.

This is what it looks like to begin to walk in a good way.

Jesus can say this to us because Jesus has done precisely this.

He 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.

Go. Do likewise.

Walk in a good way.

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