

THE REDEFINING PEOPLE

LUKE 10:25-37

EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH OF LETHBRIDGE

BY: RYAN DUECK

MARCH 13, 2016/5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

Good morning. It's a privilege to worship with you this morning. I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

I have been asked to speak this morning about the Syrian refugee crisis, about my own experience with refugee sponsorship here in Lethbridge, and about how we might frame this issue theologically in the broader context of your church's missions focus over these last two weeks.

We will get to the Syrian situation and to what has been happening here in Lethbridge in a minute.

But I want to begin in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a good place for beginnings, right?

As it happens, I just returned from Bethlehem on Friday night.

(My internal clock is still getting recalibrated—I woke up at 2:30 am today... Which was actually 1:30 am, given the time change... So, if I fall asleep during the sermon, you'll know why 😊).

I was in Israel and Palestine on a learning tour with MCC. So, we saw some of the touristy sights, but we were also given a window into the reality of what life is like for the Palestinian people who live on the other side of the wall that the Israeli government is building between Israel and the Palestinian territory in the West Bank.

It was an inspiring and sobering and unsettling trip, in many ways. There is much that is unholy in the Holy Land today.

I don't want to talk about Middle Eastern politics this morning. That would probably be a very unwise thing to do for a guest speaker. ☺

I want to tell just one story—one image that will stick with me for a long time.

One of the daily realities of life in the region is checkpoints. These are heavily armed crossings guarded by the Israeli military where everyone must pass through when traveling across the border between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In our case, this was from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. We had a morning off, so we hopped on a city bus to go see some of the sites.

So, we made it to the checkpoint. And the bus stopped.

And all of a sudden, people started getting up and exiting the bus in the back.

But not all the people. Only some. The Palestinians got up and began to make their way off the bus and to form lines outside in what looked like metal chutes.

While the rest of us stayed in our comfortable seats on the bus, they waited outside. While the soldiers barely glanced at our passports, they would be heavily scrutinized.

As I watched this incredible scene playing out, it struck me how *utterly normal* it seemed to them. They scrolled through Facebook on their phones while they waited. One young woman idly played with her hair. One guy was reading a book.

This was just what reality looked like for them. Because they had a Palestinian ID card instead of a Canadian passport.

After a while, they began to make their way back on to the bus. The girl in front of me slumped back into her seat and resumed editing photos on her phone. The guy across from me stuck his headphones back over his ears.

Normal. And I sat there, incredulous. I felt guilty that I had just sat there—that I hadn't at least gotten off the bus and stood with them or something.

(I later talked to a Swiss friend at the conference I was attending who had done precisely this... Which made me feel even more guilty!)

How could such things be normal?

It seemed so ridiculously unjust, so dehumanizing, so *wrong*.

I had heard about such things before. But to actually *see* it in front of my eyes. It rattled me.

It was like this visual parable of the world we live in. A world where people continue to be divided along all kinds of lines, where people continue to think in terms of “us” and “them,” a world of nasty and polarizing discourse, a world where a certain presidential candidate is talking about building another wall...

And as I thought about all this... and as I watched those Palestinians standing outside while I sat in my comfy seat on the bus... and as I repeatedly encountered this big, ugly wall that goes right through the heart of Jerusalem throughout the rest of the week... I kept thinking about a few very simple ones and very old questions:

Who is my neighbour? What does it mean to *be* a neighbour?

These questions arise out of our text this morning, which is a familiar and well-loved parable.

And familiar and well-loved parables are dangerous things!

The danger with familiar parables is that we just say, “oh yeah, I know what this is about” and we move on.

The eighteenth century English poet Alexander Pope put it like this: “Some people will never learn anything for this reason: because they understand everything too soon.”

This is a real danger with Jesus’ parables. They are so familiar, we understand them too soon.

Parables aren't always what we think they are.

They're not "illustrations" of theological principles. They're not truths about God presented in easier, more digestible form.

More often than not, Jesus' parables made those present very, very uncomfortable.

I would go so far as to say that if we listen to one of Jesus' parables and don't feel at least *a little* bit uncomfortable at the end, we haven't listened closely enough.

If we come to the end and feel warm and inspired and think, "Oh man, that Jesus sure does tell nice stories..." then we need to pay more careful attention.

A lawyer says to Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

("Lawyer" here means an expert in the Law of Moses. So, when you see that word "lawyer" in the gospels, don't think "Boston Legal" or "Suits"; think, "really, really religious person." Maybe "theology professor" ... or "pastor" 😊)

And so in response to the question from this really, really religious person about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus says, "Well, you see, there's this new religion that I'm about to start once I finish up with dying on a cross and rising from the dead and ascending back to the Father, and if you just align yourselves with it, you'll be fine..."

No, wait, that's not what he says.

What he *in fact* does is ignore the really, really religious person's question and answer a different one.

Rather than telling the really, really religious person who fit into the "people I have to love to get the prize" box, Jesus tells a story about what it looks like to love one's neighbour.

There was a man lying on the side of a road, broken and bleeding, desperate for help. Jesus doesn't tell us what sort of man he was—maybe he was a shady character, maybe he had committed a crime. Maybe he was a refugee. Maybe he was a "security threat." Maybe he was an ordinary law-abiding citizen.

We don't know. All we know is that he was lying on the side of the road.

And that a couple of really, really religious people passed right on by.

And that in the end, it was a Samaritan of all people—a half-breed, a worthless idolater, according to many good Jewish religious types—who bandaged his wounds, found him somewhere to stay, and paid the bill.

Jesus takes a question designed to test the limits of the category of “neighbour” and turns it upside down by taking someone that would have been considered *well* outside the boundaries of “neighbour” and having them demonstrate what love looks like.

Which probably made the really, really religious person uncomfortable.

And which should probably make us uncomfortable, too. Especially if we like to think of ourselves as really, really religious people. 😊

Who is my neighbour? Who acts like a good neighbour?

These questions are not only relevant for the land of Jesus' birth. It is a question that followers of Jesus must always be asking, wherever we find ourselves.

It's a question that leads me to Syria and the reason that I was asked to speak here this morning.

I won't sketch the details of the Syrian crisis. It's been impossible to avoid on the news for the last few years, and the information is easy enough to find online.

The big picture is that the Syrian civil war and all its complicated fall out has led to more than 11 million people—half the country's pre-crisis population—being forced to flee their homes, whether inside or outside of Syria.

It is the largest refugee crisis since World War 2.

So, in response to these realities, our church decided that we needed to act.

About a year ago, our little congregation was asking the simple question: What is God calling us to in the coming year?

We sat around tables and made lists and then brought them all back together. Sponsoring refugees from Syria was at or near the top of every list that came back. We were convinced that these were our neighbours lying in the ditch, waiting for someone to act like a neighbour to them.

We also said that we didn't want to do it alone. We thought it would be better to work with other churches both to accomplish more and to build bridges between churches.

So, we sent out some emails to gauge interest, we had some meetings, and eventually three churches agreed to pursue this together—ourselves and two United churches.

We were matched up with a Syrian family living in Lebanon to sponsor. It was all feeling good and manageable.

Then, the PHOTO happened. You know the one, right? The little boy on the beach in Turkey...

This photo really sharpened the public's attention. It led to an incredible response. All of a sudden we were fielding phone calls and emails and Facebook messages from all corners. How do I help?

All of a sudden we were getting requests from TV stations and radio programs and newspapers from Lethbridge and beyond.

And over time, the initiative grew. To deal with the growing outpouring of response, we decided to open up our next regularly scheduled steering committee meeting to those who wanted to learn more

We had over thirty people at our next meeting—people from other churches, from the university, from the hospital... people who had found us on Facebook.

While all this was happening, a young woman made contact with us via Facebook. Her name was Muna. She is from Syria and married to an Iraqi, but has been a Canadian citizen for six years. She had been trying for years to get the rest of her family to Canada.

So I went along with one of the people who had showed up at the meeting—a local Anglican priest who was interested in forming a sponsorship group—to hear her story.

She told us stories of a brother who had been arrested and never seen since. About family members who had made the three-month harrowing journey from Syria to Libya to Greece to Italy to Sweden. About having to send money to bribe officials to let her brother and his family pass through certain areas. About not being able to work or sleep because she was so sick with worry about her sisters, brothers, and parents. About pounding on countless doors to try to get help and about nobody opening them.

It was heartbreaking. And we promised that we would try to help.

And so, to make another long story short, we pieced together all the groups that had expressed an interest in sponsorship with Muna's family.

Since January, it has all kind of come together.

Our church's families arrived on January 8. Muna's family began arriving later in January.

(Some of you may have seen the recent CNN piece that was done on her)

In these last few months, we have seen many things.

We have seen Muslims and Christians sharing food together and welcoming one another to Canada. We have seen Muna (a Muslim) offering to help with translation services for our families (who are Christians).

We have seen friendships forming. We have seen "the other" move from the category of "object of compassion or charity" to neighbours.

We have also encountered a bit of animosity along the way.

Some of the most horrible emails I've ever received came through this. I've encountered some of the nastiest comments in my 10 years of blogging in response to stuff I've written about Syrian refugees (often from Christians, sadly).

And this is why whenever I talk about this issue, I keep coming back to stories like the one in Luke 10.

It is a story that makes things pretty simple.

Who is my neighbour? My neighbour is the one in need.

Who acts like a neighbour? The one who opens up and cares for the vulnerable.

We've reached the part of the sermon that I sometimes call the "so what" part. 😊

So what? What does this mean for you? It's interesting, perhaps, to hear a bit about what's been going on in our city. But what does it mean for you, whether as individuals or as a larger church body?

I'm not here to tell you what you should do as a church.

Yes, there are ways to get involved, whether through pursuing refugee sponsorship or through helping out volunteering with Lethbridge Immigrant Services, who are sponsoring the bulk of the government-sponsored refugees (from all over) who have come and will continue to come to our city, or contributing financially to relief work around the world.

But I know that you are already invested in "serving the world around you" in a number of ways, locally and around the world. And I know that God will continue to lead you in the directions that he has called you to.

I am here to do something quite simple—to remind you (me, us) that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are people who are to always be retraining our instincts from what comes naturally to the path of love.

Our instincts will quite naturally and easily take us down certain paths—paths of building walls, reinforcing rightness, maintaining habits and assumptions and boundaries.

It takes zero effort to go down this road.

But as followers of Jesus, we are to be people who are formed in different ways and toward different ends than the world around us.

Each morning this week during our conference in Bethlehem this week, we were led in devotions by Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. On Wednesday morning he described Christians in a very unique way, one I won't soon forget:

We are meant to be the redefining people.

The “redefining people.” What a marvelous description.

We are meant to be those who redefine reality not according to our instincts—to what comes naturally and with no effort—but on the heart and mind of God as revealed in Christ.

We are to be the ones whose instincts are being retrained and redefined.

Instincts of suspicion... redefined as generosity.

Instincts of self-protection... redefined as vulnerable self-sacrifice.

Instincts of insularity... redefined as hospitality.

Instincts of superiority... redefined as humility.

Instincts of putting up walls... redefined as tearing them down.

Instincts of fear... redefined as love.

We are the redefining people.

The primary question I want to leave you with today is not, *What should I or the E-Free church be doing about the Syrian refugee crisis*, important as this question is, and as much as I think it's worth asking.

The primary question I want to leave you with is, *What am I doing or what will I do in my everyday life to become the kind of person who loves better—more consistently, more instinctively, more creatively, more determinedly, more selflessly?*

Who am I opening my heart and my hands to that I might resist if not for the fact that I have given myself to Jesus and his calling?

In Luke 10, Jesus sets us on the path to being formed as different kinds of people.

He takes a question designed to mark out the boundaries of who we have to love, and goes to work reshaping and redefining our instincts.

He teaches us better questions to ask and better answers to live into.

He shows us what love looks like and he does it through the actions of one that might instinctively arouse our suspicions and our fears.

And then he says, *Go and do likewise.*

Not, be inspired by this story. Not, gaze longingly at this as unreachable ideal. Not even, marvel at the depth and revolutionary character of Jesus' teaching.

Rather, GO. DO.

And as you go and as you do, watch how you and your neighbour and the world are changed.

This is our call.

We are the redefining people. Whether here or there. In our local community or around the world. With Syrian refugees or with the neighbour across the street.

We are the church and our task is love.

We are the redefining people.

May God help us to live up to this high and holy calling.

Pray with me...

