

## Pentecost 4 – Proper 8 - 2017

I know you can't tell it from my voice but I am a proud Canadian citizen, eh. I support the Blue Jays and enjoy poutine and say sorry a lot – and can get misty eyed when singing O Canada. Which I did yesterday. As I'm sure many of you know, July 1<sup>st</sup> is Canada Day and yesterday was particularly special as it was 150 years since confederation. I celebrated my love for my adopted country and its wonderful multiculturalism, its work for peace in the wider world, its self-deprecating humour and its universal health care. Just as many on Tuesday will celebrate the freedom and independence and optimism and openness and passion that make the United States of America such a great country. But let's get real, neither the USA nor even Canada is the kingdom of God on earth.

It's easy to have rose-coloured view of places we don't live. Before I moved to Canada I had no idea of the depths of colonialism and racism that were present there. Not white/black racism but white/Asian racism as well as colonial racism towards indigenous peoples. There are many First Nations reserves in Canada facing on-going poverty and deprivation leading to distressing levels of youth suicide. Don't believe that your northern neighbour has got everything right because we haven't.

And none of us just at the moment are likely to believe that we in the US have got everything right. The threat to take basic healthcare away from millions, the deeply engrained racism that makes the police a source of fear rather than reassurance to many black Americans, the gun culture that makes death by shooting the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest cause of death among children in the United States.

Where is the prophet of peace that Jeremiah spoke of? The one whose words, when they come true, will signal the deep will of God for peace throughout the world. Where is he? When I was a little girl I dreamed of a gallant knight on a white charger who would ride bravely in and set everything right. Sometimes I dreamed I was the princess waiting to be set free but, as often, I saw myself in the figure of the knight – the rescuer rather than the one needing rescue. And I think that's where we're at today – we are to be the rescuers, the prophets of peace, the knights - not the spoiled princesses waiting for our world to be set right.

One of our contemporary gallant knights is the lawyer and writer Bryan Stevenson who works with prisoners on death row. His book *Just Mercy*<sup>i</sup> is a heartbreaking and soul-stirring picture of the injustices that poor and especially black defendants face in many courts in America. Stevenson writes not to boast of his own altruism and courage but to move his readers to help change an unjust system. And he offers a four-step plan for doing so – four steps that happens to echo all of this week's Bible readings.

Stevenson's first step towards change is to get proximate. Get up close and personal with those you want to help. Don't drop kindness down on them from a great height but get to know them and their needs and the solutions that they suggest. Be like the prophets – one of the people. Not a class set apart but individuals embedded in the world of those to whom they speak God's words.

Let me tell you of one time when I got proximate. It was during the Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada. A time when churches and the government faced up to the damage they had inflicted on First Nation families through the residential school system. In these schools children were not allowed to speak their language or to follow their own customs but were cruelly divided from their families and, often brutally, indoctrinated with western values and culture.

One small act of reconciliation was to knit prayer shawls and offer them to residential school survivors, along with a deep apology. With others from the church I took these shawls to one of the large Reconciliation events. I was fearful – I expected accusation, rightful anger and rejection. But one survivor in her 60's let me place a shawl around her shoulders while she spoke words of gentleness and thanks. She put aside my guilt with her forgiveness. She allowed us to see one another with respect as equals. She helped me to see First Nations women and men as my sisters and brothers rather than as a problem to be solved.

Get proximate – truly see the marginalized people you work beside for change. And then move on to Stevenson's second step – change the narrative. Tell a different story. Like Paul says in his letter to the Romans, stop telling a story focused on sin and start telling a story focused on grace. How transformative is that! To focus on God's gift to us, to focus on the gift that we are to one another. To see the world as a playground for God's joy and grace not a battleground for a war against sin. Change the narrative – tell God's story of gift and life and grace taking the place of sin and guilt and death! Tell America's story of welcome and hope and embracing the refugee until it replaces a narrative of exclusion and fear and discriminatory travel bans!

Get proximate. Change the narrative. Third step – stay hopeful. This is one of the reasons we gather together on a Sunday morning. Not just to bathe our souls in the beauty of this building and the beauty of this music. But to remind ourselves that we are not alone in our yearning to change the world. We are companioned by a whole host of other flawed and wonderful human beings who seek the commonwealth of God. And we are fed and nurtured and called and liked and empowered by God's very self. By the God who tells us that when we offer welcome to another person we are offering it to God.

How can we not stay hopeful when we see God so abundantly present with us? Here at the altar as God gives us his very self for food. Here in the pews as we see God in one another's wounded and glorious faces. Out there in all those people who need a cup of water from our hands. Out there in all those willing to accept the gifts that transform us in the giving. That moment with the First Nations woman was far more transformative for me the giver than for her the recipient.

Get proximate. Change the narrative. Stay hopeful. Just one more. Be prepared to be uncomfortable. Justice work isn't easy. It isn't achieved simply by preaching or by listening to sermons. It's achieved by being willing to be open to the pain of the world. To be fully present to the damage that human beings do to one another. Remember what Jesus said earlier in this chapter of Matthew – I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. We won't change the world unless we are willing to get out there, to go to sketchy places, to talk with angry people, to stand up for those too frightened and vulnerable to stand up for themselves.

Canada Day, the Fourth of July, should never be mindless celebrations of blind patriotism - 'my country, right or wrong'. They should be days on which we do celebrate all that we've been given on this beautiful continent, and all that we have given to God's world from here. But they should also be days on which we look honestly and fearlessly at what still needs to change. At what needs to happen to bring God's rule of peace and justice to our land. How we can make the voice of God's prophet of peace heard above the hubbub of self-interest. How we can weave a narrative from a place of grace not sin. How we can offer a drink of water to the little ones who need it most. How we can make America as beautiful in spirit as God made her in creation, more truly than ever the land of the brave and the home of the free.

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<sup>i</sup> *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014.