

Unsettling Truthfulness

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

June 21, 2020

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Imagine no possessions.
I wonder if you can.
No need for greed or hunger...
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.

Pie in the sky, many might say after hearing this dream put to music by Lennon in 1971, the Vietnam War was polarizing a nation. The world was raging then, but I'm hearing echoes of unrest right now in 2020.

And some say that popular music doesn't belong in worship, but I suggest that particularly songs like that envision a new world order without walls, maybe Jesus would really dig it. Is this naïve drivel, or, are these unsettling truths that threaten our comfort?

Imagine Jesus and his band of followers, women and men, nomads wandering from village to village. Imagine how they must have been perceived by the political and religious elite. Often when transformation of a system looms ahead, we experience conflict, not to mention discomfort for us if we hold a stake in keeping the status quo.

Where do you, where do I, fit into this scheme? Probably, like the first listeners of teachings of Jesus, we feel change a-comin'. As the Message version translates Jesus in today's passage:

Don't think I've come to make life cozy. I've come to...cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies.¹

In short, Jesus tells us to *Let Go*.

The forceful tone of these words tells me that Jesus *knew* that his followers had their spiritual & emotional baggage that they were holding onto. We want to follow Jesus and the unconditional love he speaks of, but isn't it challenging to leave some things behind. To let go.

I know about the discomfort of having to let go of attachments that weigh me down – our family is preparing to move tomorrow! It is hard work letting go of ... stuff. Sometimes I don't, and I end up dragging that stuff from the old house and into the new one.

Similarly, attitudes, ancient ones and our modern mindset, can tie us to the sins of our past. We inherit myths along with the facts in our childhood, we pick up more or reinforce old ones over the years. Think about a moment in your life when a myth or misconception of yours was challenged by someone you trusted. How unsettling did it feel?

To follow Jesus is transformative; by definition that growth process brings the *swords* of conflict. Jesus speaks of turning mother against daughter, father against son. I have heard seen relationships strained when a person has made a tough, principled decision but family members do not understand. Unconditional love can seem as naïve to some as Lennon's iconic song *Imagine*.

¹ Matthew 10: 34-37. The Message, Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson.

We, like those who first heard Jesus say, “I bring not peace but a sword”, need to reflect: *What stake do we have in maintaining the status quo, harmony?*

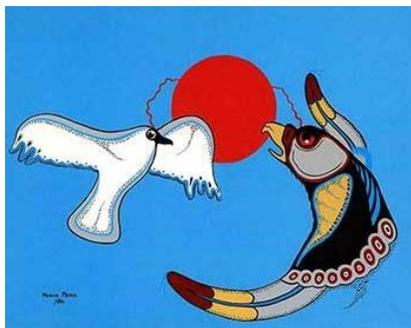
Polarization over systemic racism rages in Canada, here, this apparent cultural mosaic. News of our first ever racialized leader of a federal political party, Jagmeet Singh, call out another Member of Parliament, accusing him of racism. I don't know what really happened in Singh's encounter with racism, but I do believe that our fundamental institutions, including Churches, are still weighed down by systemic racism. Even as I say this, a I feel defensiveness lurk in me, an instinct to qualify my statement, “But maybe we are not racist.”

The unsettling truthfulness is that we as a United Church of Canada have a great deal of spiritual growing to do. We must let go – of structures, language, stories we cling to – that are steeped in our colonial history.

There *is* Good News, though. First of all, if we can just step back and listen to First Peoples of this land, racialized people, the people who are telling me, speaking out courageously to say that our systems are racist... Those very people will be the ones who will help us change. Just as Jesus and his followers were impacted each time Jesus healed – there was mutual impact. Relationship.

Who do we not see among us in worship, when we in church make decisions? It is overdue time for church leaders, for me, to listen for those voices; listen *to* those voices.

Jesus knew the system that he was a part of, and he calls us to open our eyes to see, to listen. It is long overdue time to make amends with Indigenous Peoples, to take bold steps towards Reconciliation and Healing that might begin with the sword of honest dialogue and risk.



Glimpses of Reconciliation among United Churches are out there. In Fairfield Ontario, the United Church community there has transferred land back to the Delaware First Nation. ² United Church congregations have been transformed by their relationship with their neighbouring First Nations, like Kamloops United Church who list well over a dozen initiatives reflecting true partnership with their indigenous neighbours. ³

It all begins with listening *for* the voices we previously ignored. Then, we listen *to* those voices with open minds and hearts. In the midst of the “swords” of challenging conversation, know that you and I will hear the voice of Jesus saying Love... Love... Love. Amen.

Artwork above: *The Meeting of the Eagle and the Dove* by Mervin Meekis. Meekis was from Sandy Lake Reserve. *The Meeting of the Eagle and the Dove* was presented to the 31st General Council 1986 during the consideration of the Apology to First Nations.

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor> “The United Church of Canada returns land to Delaware Nation” May 10, 2019

³ <https://kamloopsunited.ca/aboriginal-relations/>