

Wisdom's Children

Arden Mahlberg

02/17/2019

Luke 7:18-35

May these words combine with your thoughts to bring more love of Lord, neighbor and self. Amen

Last November, American missionary John Chau was shot and killed with a bow and arrow by a young male member of an indigenous tribe on a small island near India. With the support of his sponsoring agency in the US, Mr. Chau had taken it upon himself to invade this wilderness island which is under protection by the government of India. They protect it because of the dangers outsiders pose and because the indigenous people want to be left alone. Mr. Chau, though, felt called by God to convert them to Christianity and baptize them to save them from eternal damnation. He played the flute, but they did not dance.

In the last decade the government of Canada, through a process of truth and reconciliation, confessed to the 19th century policy known as “killing the Indian in the child” in order to assimilate the child into the dominant Christian society. This involved separating children from their families, coerced conversion and baptism. We have not yet begun this kind of reckoning in our country, though, the Mennonites, who are pacifists, are admitting that their historical bias, derived from Christianity, led them to judge the Indian's relationship to the land as sinful because they did not try to dominate the land as God ordered, domesticate it or maximize its value to human beings, God's favored species. The Mennonites tried to convert the Indians to their relationship to the land as farmers, believing it was God's way. They played the flute, but the Indian's had their flute, and preferred their own dance. The Mennonites are now admitting the error of their beliefs and the harm they caused. We must wonder, how much harm are we doing from our bias, and how we can recognize it before doing even more harm?

In our story today, what the Pharisees and experts in the law saw when they went out into the wilderness to check out John the Baptist was also from the bias of civilization and domination-based beliefs. John lived off the land, foraging, eating insects and wearing the hair that camels shed, undoubtedly foul smelling. They might well have felt revulsion at their encounter with him. His message was also kind of weird and he acted wild, surely either drunk or possessed. This could

not be a man of God, a prophet. John clearly had power, yes, but it must have been the power of demonic possession. Likewise, European Christians assumed that the Spiritual power Indians experienced must be demonic and the places where they went to encounter spirits must be occupied by demons. So, they banned those practices and, all over this land, they renamed those power places from things like Spirit Lake to Devil's Lake. We still use those derogatory names today. Previously, Christians had waged this same war against the indigenous people of Europe. "Pagan," meaning rural and rustic or crude, became a derogatory term. The Roman Empire had been tolerant of religious diversity before it became Christian, when the state became the agent of Christianity's war on other religions.

In our story, Jesus addressed this bias of civilization. "Those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces," he said. Palaces being the place of civilized power. But why would that be the standard of judgment about spiritual things? Why would you expect to find God in a finely adorned person of status? Why? Because people believed, as many do today, that a person's situation in life is a reflection of their standing with God. Rich, powerful, wealthy & healthy meant in favor with God. Those who spoke for God would come from high places, by that logic. Cesar, of course, even claimed to be a god. But when Jesus said, give to Caesar that which is Caesars and give to God that which is God's he was saying Caesar is not God. It was a statement of rebellion. Here he is declaring that prophets don't look like princes. Nor do they live like them. You can't tell a person's standing with God from external trappings. Since that time, wilderness people and wilderness cultures all over the world, including people from this land we are on today, have been attacked and destroyed from this judgment of not being civilized and therefore not in harmony with God, even demonic.

To see someone as they really are, we must step outside our own vantage point, including cultural bias and familiarity. But we have very little instruction in how to effectively do that, including in our faith tradition. In fact, operating from our vantage point is actually reinforced in many subtle ways within Christianity. Take, for example our Christian version of the Golden Rule from Matthew and Luke. Following our Golden Rule, the Mennonites believed the Indians would come to be grateful. Mr. Chau's supporters reason that if the tribe he contacted had known of their eternal damnation, they would have welcomed him. That is what we would want, after all, so that is what they should want.

Something similar to the Golden Rule exists in many diverse traditions all over the world. But there are important differences. In some other traditions, the Golden Rule is do unto others as they would have you do unto them. “Leave us alone” would be respected. The Christian one, do unto others as we would have them do unto us, supposes our vantage point to be universal and correct. We play the flute and expect others to dance to our music. In Mr. Chau’s world view, that could well mean invasion even if it brought disease and death, as it did for some 90% of natives of this continent, Turtle Island, as Christians from Europe invaded and planted the cross to claim this land for Christianity, before planting the flag of the nation and king that sponsored their exploits. In the MCC, with our Big Read, we are trying to address White Privilege and racism. Sadly, we have learned, through Drew Hart, that some scholars contend that White Privilege grew out of Christian privilege. So let us find, expose and disavow the traces of it in our tradition, including that the Christian version of the Golden Rule privileges our point of view.

After Jesus was baptized and experienced the power of God’s blessing, he went into the wilderness and encountered the temptations that are activated by power. Jesus saw himself on a high place, with all of the kingdoms of the world laid out before him and he saw that he could have dominion over all of them. He could play the flute and the entire world would dance. He resisted that temptation. Over time, however, his followers, also baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit and deeply moved by it, stood and stand today, overlooking the world laid out before them, before us, and succumbed to the temptations of power. Chosen by God! Dominion over everything!.

This succumbing to the temptations of power has gripped both individuals and organizations devoted to Christ. At an adult forum a few months ago we touched on the official declaration from the Vatican in the 1400’s that came as the world opened up to European Christians through sea travel. From that high place overlooking the world, two popes declared that the world yet undiscovered by Christendom, was for the taking by any Christian who would convert the natives. They labeled such land “terra nullius,” meaning “belonging to no one.” Free for the taking. The doctrine declared that they could take the land, extract its precious resources, loot the property of the inhabitants and even enslave them. They were not regarded as fellow human beings. How is that Christian? While now we might say we regard all Homo sapiens as fellow human beings, in Christian doctrine we have telltale expressions of something else, like, we are “one..... in Christ,” not one simply by our shared humanity. If not “in Christ,” you

are a heathen. Hence, this doctrine of rights and privileges over all the world and its peoples. It is known as the Doctrine of Discovery. It even became incorporated into American law, still denying rights to Indians that other citizens enjoy. The average Christian may never have heard of this official doctrine, but as colonizers they didn't need to. They had incorporated the Christian narrative that as followers of Christ, they were the Chosen People, the heirs of Abraham, with a Promised Land. That Promised Land was occupied by the Canaanites, pagans, whom God had ordered to be slaughtered in Deuteronomy. There are many subtle ways this territorial narrative was and is conveyed. In a minor example, the church even reflects its sense of ownership over others with its use of the territorial term "parish" for the area it claims responsibility for and rights to. And where is the parish church? Typically high on a hill overlooking the land and it lays claim to its people.

In our story today, Jesus refers to the desire for power and likens it to children expecting others to dance when they want them to dance, or cry when they want them to cry. Power motivates our reasoning and creates blinders to our awareness. Perhaps in this story Jesus is giving us the antidote to that condition when the story ends with his saying, "Wisdom is proved right by all her descendants, all her children." He said this in response to the view that John could not have wisdom, nor could the sinners and tax collectors Jesus chose to associate with. Here again he is defending the riffraff, this time by implying that those people also have the wisdom of God. To some extent he may also have been defending himself, because when people learned he was from Nazareth, they wondered, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was an early Canaanite settlement.

Wisdom is proved right by all her children. Jesus also said this in the context of people wondering if he was "the One," the Promised One. In the midst of that, he turns the attention to the all – all of Wisdom's children, not just a search for one. This somehow doesn't have a prominent place in our Christian narrative - that God is revealed in all, not some, not one. Jesus also addressed that people were wanting exceptions, wanting there to be Canaanites. The question "who is my neighbor," is really a search for exceptions. I don't need to love everybody do I? Tell me who I'm supposed to love so I can also know who I don't have to love. To that question, Jesus told a story about the kind of person who does not look for exceptions, a Samaritan, a hated foreigner. The Samaritans were also religious rebels; they rejected the validity of the temple in Jerusalem and had their own temple. Heathens? Are vulnerable outsiders better equipped to be compassionate

than those who are safe in their positions? Do they do less othering than the rest of us? There is mounting evidence of just that.

Finally, who is included in all of wisdom's children? Who are we supposed to listen to? Last November Linda and I had the privilege of attending The Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto. The theme was the promise of inclusion; the power of love. Religions from all over the world were represented. Among the many things that got my attention was this: When speaking of the need for inclusion, the Christian speakers first mentioned people on the fringes and those subject to violence for being who they are, including people of other faiths. All good. The non-Christian speakers, in contrast, tended to begin by mentioning animals and nature, things of the wilderness, and only then human beings. For uncivilized, native peoples, the 4-leggeds and those that crawl on the ground and fly in the air, come first. They are our teachers. All beings possess wisdom. Our lives depend on them. When Buddhists extend compassion, loving kindness, in their daily lives, it is toward all sentient beings, not just humans. They notice all suffering, and all joy, not just human. Today, Jesus challenges us to question the assumptions imbedded in our way of life and the narrative that shapes our expectations, our perception and our actions. We can't trust our gut as safe, privileged people. We remember Dr. Martin Luther King's comment that he didn't trust Northern liberal Christians because we don't recognize our own bias. Are preserving our self-image of good heartedness and virtue and preserving our favored narratives more important to us than the truth? May our eyes be opened. Amen