

Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 12:14-17; Matthew 5:21-26  
Epiphany session series on Justice and Exile.

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WE HAVE A PROBLEM  
[written in oral form]

We have a problem.  
We--our culture, our nation and each one of us -- We  
We have a problem, and the problem is our story / our relationship with the aboriginal people.

It's a messy,.... complicated problem,.....and much of it is because of our conquering, arrogant culture.  
It is a human problem. It is Our problem.  
We have a problem.  
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This is not a sermon. I'm rather picky about how I define a sermon.  
Still, I will refer to the texts and allow the core message in them to illuminate us.

The focus subject will be the Canadian region aboriginal people, yet the lessons and issues can apply to any oppressed, devalued group or ethnic minority.  
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Recently, the remote, northern community of La Loche, SK has received national attention for the tragic shooting there. The circumstances could have happened in Colorado or anywhere, yet the media-focus exposed to all of us the terrible conditions of life in an isolated First Nations community. Most of the people there live in poverty, with despair and hopelessness. The suicide rate is 20 times higher than the provincial average, and among teenagers it is 40 times higher.  
They are deprived of many support, social and health services we take for granted.  
They are the least powerful of the near powerless First Nations people in SK. They are Dene people, and their language is very different than the more common Cree. Their voice is very small, and their cries will fade quickly from the ears of those who hold power to make a difference.

This is not to suggest that the Cree are that much better off.  
They too, as with all aboriginal people, are ostracized, subjugated and marginalized.  
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This is a messy, complicated problem, and because of time restraints, I'm forced to generalize and gloss over the issues and contributing factors, so bear with me.  
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We know the historical context: the conquest by the settlers, which included labelling and devaluing the "Indians" to justify the land acquisitions. Yet, even after full occupation, the stereotyping continued and changed over time.

Daniel Francis charts these changes of typecasting in his book, "The imaginary Indian: the image of the Indian in Canadian culture.

Some of them are:  
the noble savage--admired and feared. This image still appears as team mascots.

The vanishing breed was next. The Indian of lore was believed to be disappearing, and that is why, in the late 1800's, there was a rush to photograph them for posterity, often inaccurately dressed. We've all seen those old pictures of how we think "Indians" used to be.

But, the dominate culture discovered that the Indians didn't evaporate, and what to do with them was a problem. Plus "those" surviving Indians, hungry and impoverished, didn't fit the mold. Something had to be done.

The arrogant, ruling elite concluded the best thing was to make them like "us"/ to de-Indian them,... and thus the residential schools were started.

As many of the aboriginal cultures began to fade from view, a sense of romanticism became popular. Grey Wolf epitomized this, and glorifying those *spiritual keepers of the earth* is still common today.

Today we have a mixed image for aboriginals, and the labels and adjectives are mostly degrading. And, any stereotype is a form of judgment.

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Regardless, we have a problem--people are suffering, hurting and living impoverished lives. We have a problem, and most in dominate culture want it to go away.... instead of doing all the work necessary to solve the problem.

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I told a Cree friend of mine the topic for this Sunday, and I asked him, "What should I tell the people of Waterloo North."

He said, "Tell them about the residential schools and how we chased away the nuclear waste dump."

The second suggestion, initially, surprised me. The first was obvious.

The residential school are at the heart of the problem.

The TRC's (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) recent report stated that the purpose of the schools was to "cause the aboriginal people to cease to exist" as a culture and identity. The report also declared the residential schools were "cultural genocide".

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Some facts:

--established in 1880's by PM MacDonal; began with 69 schools.

-- by 1930's there were 139.

--the last school was closed in 1996, and over 80,000 survivors are still alive.

--All aboriginal children were forced to attend, and intentionally, the schools were located far away from their parents.

--native culture and language was severely forbidden.

-- food, living conditions were too often deplorable, and sexual abuse was prevalent. There has been over 36,000 known claims of abuse.

--estimates of student deaths range from 6,000 to 50,000. Graves were frequently unmarked, and parents were sometimes never told.

--students spent 10 months at the boarding school, yet many couldn't leave because of lack of travelling funds.

In 2006 our government apologized and offered financial compensation to survivors.

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The terrible impact of these schools is long lasting, and as I said, at the core of the whole problem.

Not only were children abused and devalued--leaving permanent psychology wounds. The schools nearly destroyed the social network and robbed the student of the ability to learn healthy parenting.

Stories full of pain and anguish were the common chorus at the TRC hearings. Countless agonizing stories were told. In addition, the elders shared in small groups that another lasting impact was the absence of family love and lessons. Students left the schools not knowing how to properly parent and not having a supportive social network.

Subsequently, young parents could not get helpful advice from their parents, nor their grandparents.....because they ALL went to the residential schools. There was/is a dearth of healthy social knowledge and support.

To be sure, many First Nations individuals have bravely and amazingly found ways to healing and a healthier life, but many more are struggling and sinking in despair.

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I've just presented a simplified overview of part of this messy, complicated problem.

And so,.....what can / what should be done?

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I'll try to explain this with an analogy.

Picture a bicyclist who was knocked down by a speeding car, and then was repeatedly run over by other vehicles.

Before you is someone with cuts, scraps, broken bones and internal injuries. The injured person represents the aboriginal situation. Please don't think everyone is in such a state.

What to do? How to respond to the injured?

We could ignore the person, but we know the story of the good Samaritan,.....so that option is shameful.

We could advise the injured person to go to the hospital on their own; to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and we walk away.

This option is also cruel and unrealistic.

We could have pity and acknowledge the terrible injustice, and make laws to prevent future mishaps, such as bike lanes and speed limits,... or.. treaty laws. Rectifying injustices is a good thing. Treaty rights are good. Yet, the controlling culture can resent such restrictions and overtures. There can be angry pushback to those who claim treaty rights and land claims. It can get ugly when roads are blocked, and fish are caught without limits.

It is good to correct injustices, but what about the injured person?

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Another approach to the injured is saying, "I'm sorry", and giving the person some money to show how sorry you are and help pay for healing. That is what happened in 2006.

Yet, the injured is still wounded on the side of the road, and the sight is making all uncomfortable. The money didn't make the problem go away.

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So far, none of these reactions are solving the problem, especially OUR part of the problem, which includes our stereotyping and arrogance.

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To put this all in perspective. How would we respond if the injured was someone we dearly loved?

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No doubt, we would do whatever it takes to bring healing, and our involvement would be personal, very personal.

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So, if we choose to be part of the healing/ part of the solution, then we must make sure that we are no longer contributing to the problem.

We must be agents for healing.

The text in Romans contains some helpful insight. The passage reminds us to act nobly, and to NOT be arrogant and an elitist.

Remember, those traits were behind the residential schools.

Paul said a way to shed haughtiness is to associate with the lowly.

If we can think of people who are lowly, then we are still part of the problem, but at least we know what to do about it.

And, associate doesn't mean a weekly visit or simply being benevolent to the poor. Associate means.....being with them/ forming friendships/ being comfortable to the point that "lowly" no longer exists.

When we see all people as equal / as a loved one, then we become part of the healing....because we are being healed, too.

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The second thing Max, my Cree friend, said to mention was how his community stopped uranium waste from being stored near their town of Pinehouse, SK. Areva and Cameo, two mining companies, had tried to bribe their way to approval for constructing the storage site.

People from Saskatoon, the Osler M.C. and residents of Pinehouse worked together to block the project.

I think Max wanted me to share this story because it is about Now-- a current success story/ a story of hope. In addition, many people from various walks of life, banded together, as equals. It is his story; it is my story; it's a Cree story; it is a settler story... it is our story.

This incident features people helping each other, and....

it includes the reason how Max became my friend.

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The Matthew text grants us motivation for being part of the solution / for being healers.

In the passage, Jesus states that broken relationships must be restored before going to the altar in the temple.

Keep in mind, the altar was the place where people sought reconciliation with God.

Therefore, Jesus is saying don't even think about reconciling with God / don't even think of having a healthy relationship with God, if we haven't mended / healed our broken relationships with others.

How we live with others / how we regard all people greatly impacts our relationship with God.

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I suspect that the trauma from our affluence, arrogance and inflated self worth is clouding our ability to fully appreciate the importance of what Jesus said.

Our priority in life may not be in reconciling with God.

And, if that is case, then we have a problem. We have a problem.

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We are wounded. We are hurting. We are broken; we are not better; we are equal with everyone. To think otherwise is naive and arrogant, and the way of war, oppression and destruction for all, including ourselves.

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Our hope and path to healing / the solution to the problem begins with confessing our brokenness and our need for God and each other, including aboriginals. God is in the healing and restoration.

God is in the healing and restoration.