

Homily

Sunday 22 June 2008

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost and National Aboriginal Day of Prayer

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

I won't ask how many people actually buy the things—but how many people stand at the checkout in the grocery store and scan the headlines splashed across the front pages of tabloids like *The National Enquirer* or *The Weekly World News*? What drives us to be curious about headlines like “Brad and Angelina: are they really together this time?” or “Is Tom Cruise gay?”? Do we really need to know the answers to either of those questions? Ask Princess Diana's family about the worth of the reporters who try to dig up the exclusive story or angle for the one-of-a-kind photo—but the wider public legitimises this kind of media coverage when it snaps up the latest edition of the supermarket tabloid. We seem to revel in the details of other people's lives and even more so when there is a scandal involved. Humans love scandals.

In the reading from Genesis today, there is a scandal. Abraham, concerned that he would die without an heir from his barren wife Sarah, conceived a son with Hagar, a servant (Genesis 16:1-15). But, Sarah was threatened by the presence of Hagar and Ishmael and ordered them out of the household and into the wilderness. Abraham was concerned, but did as he was told—fearing, of course, that the two would not survive. But, Hagar and Ishmael, cursed by Sarah, were blessed by God. God provided life-giving water and shelter and Ishmael, like Isaac, survived to be the ancestor of a great nation (Genesis 25:12-18).

The Gospel is likewise scandalous. We must remember the context of the Gospel reading today. Jesus has just sent out the disciples into the surrounding countryside to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God, to cast out demons, and to heal the sick. They were to go without any extra supplies, trusting in the hospitality of those they encountered on the journey. Jesus warned them that not everyone would receive them (or their message) with open arms, however, and he counselled them to move on when they were rebuffed (Matthew 10:1-23).

We pick up today with Jesus continuing his words of warning and encouragement. He cautions the disciples to remember that, since the Pharisees have condemned him as the Devil (the master of the

house is called Beelzebul), they too can expect to be maligned. Nevertheless, he says, they must still go out to do the ministry to which he has called them, trusting that God will provide.

Jesus, of course, understood fully what he was asking the disciples to do. He understood that there were people who would not want to hear the message that was being proclaimed or who would misunderstand the intentions of the disciples. He knew there were those who call them blasphemers for daring to heal in the name of God. He knew that the same Pharisees (and those like them) who had condemned him would also condemn those who followed him.

But why would they condemn? Because they were scandalised! Jesus dared to proclaim a Kingdom that was not of this world. He healed on the Sabbath. He invited into his presence all manner of people who were scandalous: sinners, outcasts, tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick and unclean. Jesus cared not at all for social boundaries and conventions. He was concerned with human dignity and salvation. If it meant stepping on the toes of the Pharisees and other “righteous” people, so be it. And, because he was willing to do this, people were scandalised and they condemned him.

The problem is, Jesus knew that when people judge in such a way, they are actually worse off than the people they are judging. They are worse off because, in judging another, they end up denying themselves the basic human dignity that is inherent in every human being. Just as Jesus said in the Gospel, every hair on our heads is numbered by God, and we are more important than all the sparrows in the world (Matthew 10:29-31). Yet, when we engage in judging others, we end up measuring them against ourselves. We fail to acknowledge our own worth based solely on who we are as beloved children of God and instead find our value in our differences from others.

Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus is talking to a group of people who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt”. He told this story about a Pharisee and a tax collector in the Temple, praying. The Pharisee is looking up to heaven, praying all the right words and actions. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” The tax collector, on the other hand, is prostrate on the ground, not daring to look up, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” At this point in the story, I can just imagine each one in the audience saying, “Thank God I am not like that Pharisee”, failing to see that, in that very moment, they have

become the Pharisee because they passed judgement on another. Jesus finishes the parable by saying, “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other....” Talk about taking the wind of one’s sails!

There is in every human being, in every one of us here from time to time, a need to measure ourselves against others, to judge others. We judge not because we are so noble as to desire that sinners be converted but because it makes us feel good about ourselves when we can point to someone else and say, “thank goodness I’m not that person.” Even more sadly, we do it because admitting that the other person is as human as we are might mean giving up some of our own power, prestige, or self-righteousness. We find ways to justify our self-righteousness in Scripture, tradition, or history so we don’t have to admit that this person—whom Jesus would likely invite to dinner—might be as good as me (I could get into the same-sex issue here but that’s a WHOLE other sermon!). We become imprisoned in a self-destructive behaviour that fails to acknowledge every human being’s basic goodness and the love that God our Creator has for every one of us because of who we are: unique and different from each other.

It seems like the perfect day for this Gospel reading. Today is the National Aboriginal Day of Prayer, yesterday was National Aboriginal Day, and eleven days ago, the Prime Minister finally stood up on behalf of Canada and apologised to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the Indian Residential Schools system. Today we pray for Aboriginal people everywhere, that they may experience the healing and grace-filled touch of the Great Spirit of God.

There is scandal in this legacy, too. The Church has been complicit in judging Aboriginal peoples. We looked at Native culture and spirituality and said that it was barbaric, uncivilised and savage. We refused to see the inherent goodness in Aboriginal peoples and their ways and we denied that they could be as fully human as we are. We used our power in the grossest way and left a swath of destruction. We took away Aboriginal culture, language, and religion, and forced European culture, languages, and religion on them. We took children away from parents, some never to meet each other again. We judged, and in so doing, we became the Pharisee. We became the Pharisee that Jesus cautions us not to be. We destroyed Aboriginal communities and we destroyed a part of our own humanity.

It is time for us to be honest and open about what we have done. It is time for us to apologise to our brothers and sisters and to help them on the journey to wholeness and healing. It is time for us to step down from our self-righteous vantage point and engage with all those whom Jesus calls brother and sister, too.

There has been much good done by the Church in the last twenty years in this field. In many places, the Church has been responsible for maintaining Aboriginal languages through the publishing of hymn and service books and Bibles in Native tongues. The Church has been outspoken in the lobby for the rights of first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, a sign of the ongoing process of repentance. The Anglican Church of Canada has been a leader in the apology and healing process of the legacy of Residential Schools.

But, the work must continue. This is a world which is sorely broken and which needs to hear over and over again the good news of the Kingdom of God. It is a world where people need the assurance of grace and to hear the words of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness that are entrusted to us. Like the disciples, we are charged with going out into the world, preaching and teaching and healing the sick. Like the disciples' mission, the task before us is not going to be easy. People will reject us as they rejected Jesus and the Twelve. People will fight to hold onto their defence mechanisms, their power structures, the things they think make them more fully human. Nations will rise up and members of the same family will fight with one another. Churches will not be exempt from the struggle. But, Jesus says, whoever loses their life in his name will surely find it (Matthew 10:29).

Jesus calls us to reveal in the light the things he tells us in the dark and the things which are told in whispers are to be shouted from the housetops (Matthew 10:27). It may cost us here, but what a reward we shall have! So, brothers and sisters, may each of us pray for courage, wisdom, and guidance from the Holy Spirit to empower us to do these things, and to do them in a spirit of understanding and not of judgement, in a spirit of reconciliation instead of self-righteousness, proclaiming to all the world around that Jesus Christ is Lord: Lord of Love, Lord of Mercy, Lord of all Creation. Amen.

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