

Search your hearts

Jeremiah 17: 5-10 and Luke 6: 17-26

Blessed are they who, like trees planted beside a river, need not fear or be anxious in times of drought. Who in the midst of fear or discomfort, do not react but rather dig down. I am currently reading a book called “First, let’s make friends with the monster.”¹ It is a memoir of a woman who has suffered from anxiety her whole life in different ways, in different forms as well as chronic illness. And one of the things she speaks of is the importance of breathing. Even when our brain is off running with anxious thoughts, our breath can tell our body that it is safe and that we will ride this storm through. Like a tree planted by the waters, we do not need to fear.

Being Christian can be awkward. Even just reading the Beatitudes aloud, especially the version from Luke can get awkward. I mean it’s difficult but imagine you’re on the street corner and your job is to say, ‘Woe to you who are rich.’ Not exactly how most people like to start a conversation. But as Jeremiah says, ‘Our hearts can be devious.’ They tell us something is scary and to run away fast, but our faith says: Yep this is scary, so take a deep breath and stay where you are.

If you are like me, you often learn something that makes you say, feel or act reactively. So, for example, I was reading an article called “There Are No Minorities.” The author mentioned that as early (or as late) as 1946 a sociologist named Louis Worth wrote, “minority is a word applied by some people to those who will receive differential treatment. It is a word chosen by a group of people to say some of us are too different and we (who are *not* them) are okay in feeling that they are of lesser worth and we are of greater worth. We can bar them from certain opportunities, exclude them from participation in the church life, the national life, the community life.” His assessment noted, this has *nothing* to do with numbers. Instead, minorities are those who did not at the time have the power to say, ‘no, *you* are the minority.’ Instead they were labelled as ‘other,’ ‘apart’ and thus not worthy of a voice at the table.

I don’t know about you, but it makes me, reading that type of article, have to rethink a whole bunch of assumptions I had made. Minorities aren’t the least amount of people; they are the majority of the people, numerically. And depending on who you want to choose as your

¹ Upon reflection I remembered that it is called *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*. It is by **Sarah Wilson** and was published February, 2017 by Macmillan Australia.

“minority,” they will still make up more of the Earth’s population; more people don’t speak English, there are more people the world with a darker skin tone than those who are in power. This makes my brain hurt: trying to undo a definition I thought I knew.

This also happens with the word “race.” This word was literally *invented* by a small group of people when they noted as they travelled around the world that not everyone was like them. They were noticing that they felt uncomfortable the darker the peoples’ skin got. And because these particular people had the privilege of having a lot of free time and way too many resources, they went back to their homes and discerned that they probably could prove that their fear of a darkening skin colour was a *rational* fear. It can’t just be based on my human need to belong to a group and thus have the other group! It can’t be just because I am afraid, I might be different.

And so, they began to collect (romantic as it sounds) skulls. A small group of very powerful people collected a bunch of skulls, measured them, and discerned from those measurements that universally, we can “just” all know; the darker the skin, the lower the IQ; the darker the skin, the more likely it is that “they” need us. And this of course becomes the beautiful background for colonization. “I shall come to your land because obviously your skin tone tells me you can’t run it for yourself, so I shall run it for you.”

Now here’s the part that really hurts my brain: as much as they completely made up biological race (it is not scientifically possible) they had so much power in the world (in writing curriculum, in running governments, in creating media) that now we need to talk about the fact that race *does* exist, it just exists in a different way. They wanted it to be a scientifically proven fact that humans were unequal – never to be seen in the same groupings.

What they proved instead that a small group of powerful people can convince enough other people of a lie. That they can create an entire systematic structure that allows us to kidnap children of one place and have them become slaves in another. We can have a legal system where - when we see two parents raising a child we can legally think (as the Canadian churches did): They won’t do that well enough, we will do it for them. And then taking children and raising them in another place. And so, racism is real. It is formed in our everyday language. It is in our curriculums, it is in our churches and it is so strange to know that this real powerful force is based on something that is not real.

This learning from others is called truth-telling and it is the definitive for me of *awkward*. Truth-telling happens when people who have been victimized, marginalized, excluded and oppressed are given a platform to speak and everyone else listens. It means that I can not sit in my chair and say, ‘I am very progressive,’ *and* at the same time, when someone tells me their story say, ‘Oh but that isn’t really what happened. You must have taken it out of context.’ Instead, if I am going to say I am progressive, if I am going to say that I am Christian, I am going to stay in that chair and shut up. It means that when someone tells me they were walking down an Edmonton street and someone yelled out the window to them, ‘Go back to where you came from’, and that person

who was yelled at was a fifth generation Albertan, I must believe that story. It makes me feel totally gross. I do not want to live in an Edmonton where this happens. It did and does happen.

“Shutting up” sounds like a rude saying and I never considered it sacred until this summer. As some of you may know, this past summer, The United Church of Canada gathered in a room and at one point someone spoke about how, often when we go to talk about racism or how it may play out in the church, we listen to the white person tell their experience of how racism impacted them. They suggested that now must be a time to listen to people of colour (all sorts of colours) about what their experience is and even more powerfully, to believe them. The person in charge of this meeting said, ‘That would be really powerful. Let us listen to these stories of our church.’

And then five white people got up to the microphones. Luckily, someone, after the second person spoke, went up to the “point of order” microphone. It’s a powerful microphone; it means you can interrupt the proceedings. This person stood up and said, ‘I would like to ask again that we hear from people who are not white, those that consider themselves not white or who identify as not white. I would like to hear their stories.’ At which point our now past-moderator Rev. Jordan said, ‘That is a great idea. I am going to invite some of us in this room to shut up. And I am going to invite us all to listen. And if anyone here would like to tell us their story of racism in the church; we are ready for that awkward conversation.’

Did the world change that day? Well no, racism still exists, but Jesse Lipscombe taught us something on Tuesday night. He asked that instead of feeling guilty and clamming up, to ask people to tell their stories. Call people on their “off-colour” jokes.

“Every single pebble that you can throw into the pond will create the ripples that will make the change we are all seeking.”²

Jesus proclaims that poverty is the beginning of true learning, true blessing, true relationship. May we all acknowledge where we are poor in knowledge, in experience and in education. May we all seek wisdom from whoever is in our midst who is other and who is willing. May God be revealed in the midst of all awkward conversations. Amen.

² For more about Jessie Lipscombe, guest speaker at Robertson-Wesley’s **Stewardship Breakfast 2019** please see <https://www.avenueedmonton.com/City-Life/Top-40-Under-40/2017/Jesse-Lipscombe/>