

2015 05 03

TUMC Preaching "... and who our relatives are"

Matthew 7:15-23

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will know them by their fruits.

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

Proverbs 30:7-9

Two things I ask of you;
do not deny them to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, 'Who is the Lord?'
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.

Do I detect an accent? That's what I get, sometimes, after the first conversational pause. Or when I start to speak during my portion of our Gospel Peacemaking retreats with the Catholic Schools, it usually takes 3 seconds before a row of girls starts giggling and I hear whispered references to Harry Potter, or Peeta from the Hunger Games. That's just how I say my name. They detect an accent.

It can be a little annoying for me. Everyone has an accent. Like when people ask if I will go and work overseas and I explain that I already AM overseas. It can be annoying, but it is not a real problem. Not like people of East Asian descent or African heritage who are asked 'where are you from', and when they reply 'Canada', asked 'yes, but where are you REALLY from'.

Our preaching series 'who we are and where we are' is not just a simple naming. It doesn't take four weeks to say 'we are Mennonites in Toronto in the spring of 2015'. This series is also asking 'where are you really from', in the context of indigenous-settler relations, in how we came to this land, or what histories allowed us to be here.

Questions like 'where are you really from' can be more than intrusive. They imply that the individual needs to offer some explanation for their presence, that it is not enough that they are

simply here. It rests on the premise that there can indeed be a question about a person's presence in a place - and that the questioner has a right to an answer. In a world where actual human life can be defined as 'illegal' without the right documentation, there can be a lot of power behind asking 'yes, but where are you REALLY from?'

Or what if, quite simply, you do not know. Not everyone knows their ancestry. Some things are forgotten, or deliberately obscured, or too painful to remember. Not everyone knows how they came to be where they are. For many people, movement and identity were not choices that made but were forced upon them. It may simply be a mystery. Not everyone can answer that question 'yes, but where are you REALLY from?'

There is nothing wrong with the basic interest. We are allowed to be interested in each other. We are supposed to get to know each other, to share stories and learn about the world. And it is important. Who we are and where we are are also stories about how we came to be here.

There is a connection between identity and location that is discarded or ignored by philosophies of the individual. We are discouraged from acknowledging ethnic difference in favour of a model of blanket equality and same-ness. We are urged to focus on the present and not dwell on the past, to engage with the facts on the ground, and be realistic, rather than exploring how things got to be the way they are.

And it is not polite to ask some questions. Questions about ethnic origins can be impolite, unwise, and threatening.

But we, as a congregation, are talking about 'who we are and where we are'. We have chosen to explore these things, our difficult, and complicated histories and mysteries. To help us do that, I add the question '... and who are your relatives?'

Who are you. Where are you from. Who are your relatives. I have heard these questions as the basis of introductions in Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe, and I suspect in many other indigenous cultures of Turtle Island. People share the things that testify to who they are - the place they come from, the names they carry, and who their relatives are. These questions might seem rude, invasive, but they are primarily an invitation to be known.

And many times I have heard in prayers and proclamations in indigenous spaces concluded with 'All My Relations'. It reminds us that this address is not just to those nearby, but to all relations - and that includes the more-than-human world - the plants, animals, and earth.

I've never actually been asked about my relatives in indigenous spaces, but I've spent enough time with Mennonites to know how useful it is to be able to drop some names. It builds trust, friendship, and accountability. In those spaces, asking 'who you are, where you come from, and who are your relatives' is an invitation to community. When I came to this church and began teaching Junior Youth, I was asked to find references from other churches where I had served. I talk about being a member of TUMC when I visit other Mennonite Churches. It helps me be welcomed. Usually.

But these are recent things. When I tell my life story, I usually begin four hundred years ago, in the East of England, as rich men from London hire Dutch engineers from the lowlands of Holland to dig canals, construct sluices and drain the flat marshes known as the Great Fenland.

History tells how they convert it from unproductive and diseased marshes into valuable agricultural land. In the late 1970s, my parents moved to the region, following economic opportunity in the form of a job in an agricultural college. I was born in the years that followed and raised in those lands under large skies, of potato fields criss-crossed with long, straight drainage channels, horizons dotted with old pumping stations and modern wind turbines, with villages, towns and churches shaped by over a millennia of history.

History teaches that the unique land of my childhood was created, manufactured, out of unhealthy and unproductive fens, and centuries later, my family settled there. But people already lived in those fens. They had special technology to help them live well. I have seen it, preserved in fenland museums; eel traps, flat-bottomed punting boats, stilts for wading in the water and homes to reduce the chill and damp. They fed themselves and raised their families and lived their lives. We remember them with epithets like 'Fen Tigers', with fierce, proud, independent characteristics, and jokes about webbed feet. But they themselves are not there any more.

When the rich men from London began to drain the fens, the locals petitioned Parliament to stop the destruction of the habitat they knew so well. They wrote protest songs. They prayed. They took buckets of water and poured them on the drying lands. They sabotaged the sluice gates and canal works. And when the land was destroyed, converted into productive and profitable farmland, the healthy ones became the labourers on those farms, whilst the old ones kept house and remembered, as their grandchildren drifted to the growing cities to become the industrial labouring class of the centuries to come.

And in the late 1970s, my parents moved to the region, following economic opportunity in the form of a job in an agricultural college.

Last Sunday, Shannon shared with us some of the history of Saskatchewan that is her personal history. I hope you noticed some broad similarities. In each case a distinct land-based culture is faced with a settler population with an agenda of accumulation. There is no overt conflict. There is no war, no conquest, no surrender. There is economic activity, development, civilisation, all legitimised by Progress, Religion, and Science. The unique biosphere of each land is intentionally change. The bison are slaughtered and replaced with parcels of farmland just like the eels and ducks that the Fenfolk depended upon disappear as the lands are drained. And, although on a different continent, it all happens at about the same time, and rich men from London are signing papers to make it happen.

We as a congregation, are talking about 'who we are and where we are'. How did we come to be here, in Toronto in the spring of 2015? How does my history testify to the person I am? How do our personal and collective histories help us know who we are, in Toronto in the spring of 2015?

It is a question about knowing. How can we know these things? How do we reconcile different ways of knowing? And how does knowing God, and making God known, fit into this?

In the scripture from Matthew, we get some stark words from Jesus. The gospel compilers, in their wisdom, usually divide up these into separate sections, but I read them as a single piece. Both passages focus on the act of knowing, and of testifying to another person.

We are empowered to know false prophets, whose innocuous appearance hides danger and destruction. Jesus tells us to see what impact they have on the world. Then he tells us (and presumably, warns any false prophets) the consequences of witnessing to the name of Jesus against the will of God. He will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

I never knew you. What a terrible prospect. How worthless it makes all the other activities, in the final analysis. No matter how good everything else was, without that one piece, it was all worthless. Jesus does not testify in favour of these unfortunates. He does not know them. That bond does not exist and, although they have claimed his name, he does not claim them, because they did not truly follow the Will of God.

It is like my former pastor saying he does not know me when asked for a reference for work with TUMC Junior Youth. Being unknown is insecurity. Having no-one to vouch for you and testify to your good nature. Clearly, we do not want that for ourselves or our people. We want Jesus to know us.

How are we known? By our fruit. Good fruit or bad fruit in relation to other people, of course. In terms of Christian service and good works. But there is more. I don't think fruit is simply a randomly chosen metaphor. I think it speaks to our relationship with place, with the world, with the land. Do grapes come from thorns? Is our mission to the world one that feeds, and blesses, and nurtures growth? Are we a natural part of this region, harmonious and worthy? Or are we a fierce, invasive species, poisonous and thorny and choking out other life?

To know the difference between good and bad trees, you need to know the biosphere. What is good for the land. This is both a spiritual and a physical truth. To know who we are we need the context of where we are, because the fruit we produce may be good in one place but bad in another.

Part of that context is who we claim as relatives. 'Who is your relative?' A more traditional Christian phrase might be 'who is your neighbour?' With whom do you have trust and respect and mutual aid? Those people who testify to us, help us to know who we are and where we are. Are we a blessing to the place we are in? Our neighbours and relatives should be able to help us understand that, and be better.

I said earlier that Haudenosaunee prayers often close with 'all my relations'. Whatever has been said is said in the presence of all these relations. The gathered human beings are merely the start of these relations. 'All My Relations' includes the entire created world, animals, fish, plants, winds, and more. Imagine calling on the whole to witness your prayer, your commitment, your good words. Imagine being responsible to all of that. A desire to bear good fruit sounds different when it is a promise made to trees.

What has been our fruit in this land? Many good things, undoubtedly. Many fine ideas, technologies, social institutions and ideals. I also see climate chaos. Tar sands extraction, fracking, mountain top removal, deep sea oil drilling, pipelines leaking, refinery air pollution, mercury poisoning, clearcut logging, uranium mining, and endless expanses of sterile lawns.

My generation and the next are hearing that the Earth may well turn its back on them. Did we not build wind turbines and go to climate rallies and ride our bikes? But the Earth will say 'I do not know you. You are not a part of me. Depart from me, you unbalanced ones.'

And that is where I bring in the prayer of Agur from Proverbs 30. This was not the lectionary text today, it was the text for the Junior Youth lesson. It was the first time I have studied it. It has a very simple message. It asks for truth, which includes the truth to know who we are, where we are, who all our relations are. And it asks not to be rich, so that the praying person does not deny God. And it asks not to be poor, so that the praying person does not need to steal, and dishonour God.

This path between poverty and riches, between greed and pride, between desperation and distain, this is one of the ancient sources of wisdom we need at this time. This is a prayer we should all be praying. The colonisation of this land came from both poverty and riches. The rich who drove the processes used the poor desperate for land, security and freedom to dispossess indigenous peoples and occupy the land. Now here, in Toronto in the spring of 2015, we ask who we are going to be.

All my relations.