

The Hope of Becoming The Church: Part 1

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Will you pray with me?

Living God, help us to find our hope not in the way things are, but in your self-giving and self-manifestation. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Today we start a two-week series called “In Hope of Becoming the Church”. The purpose here is to consider two parables from Matthew in the context of what we are becoming and the challenges we face as God bring us along in our story together.

And on this Indigenous Peoples Sunday I wanted to begin with a form of divine inspiration; a traditional indigenous story. So, we will hear about Wenebojo, a kind of cultural hero for the Ojibwa people, called “Wenebojo and the Cranberries”.

Wenebojo was walking along one day by the edge of a lake and saw some highbush cranberries lying in the shallow water. He stuck his hand in the water and tried to get them, but he couldn't. He tried over and over again to get those cranberries. Finally, he gave up trying to stick his hand in the water and instead, he tried to grab them with his mouth by sticking his head

in the water. That didn't work either, so he dove down into the water. The water was so shallow that the little rocks in the bottom hurt his face. He jumped out of the water and lie down on his back on the shore holding his face. He opened his eyes and there were the berries hanging above him! He had only seen their reflection in the water. But he was so angry that he tore the berries off the tree and didn't eat any, and he walked away.

Well, I dunno about you but I see myself in this story, moments of frustrating foolishness, diving into something only to learn a troubling lesson. The one story that comes to mind is when I was crossing prince William sound with a large group, about a 137-mile wilderness passage, and we were hungry! We camped on a small uninhabited island full of giant blue berry bushes taller than me covered in berries the size of quarters, they tasted amazing. We gorged on bowls and bowls of blueberries: blue berries for snacks, blueberry pancakes, blueberry oatmeal. And then that night we all learned why you should not eat bowls and bowls of blueberries. One by one, we all climbed out of tents stumbling in the darkness, to, well, be cleaned of our greed.

Every time I eat blueberries now, I give them the side eye and think "Oh boy, just a handful."

One of the gifts of Indigenous stories featuring Wenebojo is that people identify with him; there is just enough humanness and foolishness and failings for us to see ourselves in the story. And in so doing, we can learn another more fruitful, "right" way of living.

Likewise, we can identify with our parable from Jesus in Matthew. First told by Isaiah (Isa. 5:1-7) this is what is called a juridical parable. In a juridical parable the storyline is believable, the actors usually morally reprehensible, and purposefully presented to keep the audience at a slight distance. This distance prevents the audience from judging the actors with their own self-interest. The storyteller then pronounces judgment, a claim of how to "live the right life." A mirror is lifted to the audience, and in so many words scripture says "Ha- you thought this was about someone else! Ha- you are the actors, you are the man, you are the woman I speak of, ITS YOU!"

You can imagine juridical parables typically have one of two effects on those who hear them: they either inflame or convict.

When the Chief priests and pharisees heard this parable from Jesus, they realized he was speaking to them, they were inflamed, and they wanted him arrested.

For those of us who have settled into a familiar truth of Jesus or are zealous guardians of a particular way of doing religion: we may also should find this parable inflammatory, or offensive.

In John Calvin's analysis he comments that Christians should expect two things: first that rejection will occur. It's a rejection not just of a Christian point of view or moral or spiritual vision for life; we should expect a rejection of Jesus himself as savior. This can be violent and personal. Secondly, Calvin elaborates that the members of the vineyard were vinedressers, those placed in position of power, who rose up against their

proprietor. So, it is those in leadership within the vineyards own household who engaged in the most destructive rejection of the owner by killing his son.

At this personal level, Calvin says HA! It's you! You powerful foolish church leaders! It's you who hold stature in Christ's church who most deeply betray Jesus.

At this point you might be sitting in a pew or the choir loft or online quietly thinking to yourself "I didn't come to church to have a mirror lifted and fingers pointed in my face, saying I'm to blame or that I reject Jesus! I didn't come to hear religion spoke of poorly or its leadership cast in such a violent selfish light. I came to hear something hopeful!"

Guess what, I did not want to come and preach a message like this either. Trust me, I'll hear about it as the door after church! But preachers have to do all kinds of foolish things to stay true to our calling and show our faith to guide. It's like the old joke:

A circuit-riding preacher trained his horse to go when he said, "Praise the Lord," and to stop when he said, "Amen." The preacher mounted the horse, said "Praise the Lord," and went for a ride in the nearby mountains.

When he wanted to stop for lunch by a mountain stream, he said, "Amen."

He took off again, saying "Praise the Lord."

The horse started heading toward the edge of a cliff on a narrow mountain trail. The preacher got frightened and said, "Whoa!" Horse kept going. Then he remembered and said, "Amen," and the horse stopped just short of the edge. Whew! The preacher was so relieved that he looked up to heaven and said, "Praise the Lord!"

Oops! That's foolish! Its foolishness to come to a progressive church and focus on an indicting inflammatory message mostly directed at myself and the leadership which I serve alongside. This morning I probably cost myself a few cups of coffee and maybe a nice lunch!

But the parable is clear: it is human nature to reject revelatory nature of Jesus Christ. It is the nature of religious institutions to also do this: because there is a permanent tension between being conserving the traditions, patterns, building and beliefs that faithfully maintain and responding to an ever-growing, ever-manifesting revelation- The Living Word.

In speaking about the Christian religion Karl Barth shares: *What we have here, in its own way- a different way from other religions but no less seriously, is unbelief (which is) opposition to the divine revelation, and therefore active idolatry and self-righteousness. It is in place of and in opposition to the self-manifestation and self-offering of God. "*

I enjoy training and hunt testing my dog. Nova is a wonderful huntress, there is a picture of her in the bulletin. Over the last few years, I have gotten to learn from some of the best trainers in the country and Nova has come further than I ever imagined. I cannot describe the depth of a trainer and working dogs' relationship as they mature together into a team: it's a

powerful living bond that defies words. It must be experiences. And irritatingly, a working dog holds up a mirror to you as the handler. There is no way to achieve master level titles without the handler- being vexed, broken down, having your hopes smashed. Dogs will show you your lack of patience, your temper, your ignorance.

Last Thursday Nova and I were in the thick aspen woods not a soul around. She “got birdie” and her tail was wagging and she pranced back and forth having scented a grouse. Then there was a thunderous eruption of the bird blowing up the leaves from the forest floor, Nova freezes as taught, I shoot twice into the trees, I say her name to send her after the bird, and she leaps away and disappears. After a while she bursts back grouse in her mouth and then comes and places it in my hands- eyes twinkling.

A lot just happened there. But I am sure, that all joy we share together, all the ribbons and titles we possess, come because I view Nova as a living breathing creature made in Christ’s image. This is the cornerstone of how I handle her and have built our bond upon.

I wonder where we have known the blessing of efforts and bonds built upon the cornerstone of Christ? Where might we have thrown out our cornerstone?

Jesus says:

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.^a 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”^a

Words like shattered and smashed are not typically Good News, especially when it comes to faith and matters of the heart.

Is this a warning? Is this a threat? Perhaps it is not, perhaps it's the Good News. A turning point in our parable: Jesus reminds us of God's promise to provide for those who remain responsive and hold in incarnate faith. An Incarnate faith, meaning one this living and breathing and coursing with Jesus hormones of justice seeking, wisdom, and grace.

Consider these words from Parker Palmer-

"There is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart "broken open" into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. We know that heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace because we have seen it happen with our own eyes as people enlarge their capacity for empathy and their ability to attend to the suffering of others." -Parker Palmer

The Good News is that upon the Cornerstone, hardened hearts are shattered, ardent forms of religious custom called into question, room is made for ever renewed faithfulness. Compassion and grace seep in where only darkness loomed. We are enlarged, better prepared to receive the Kingdom that only God can fathom.

Let us not forget that Isaiah reminds us that God is especially close to the contrite, close to the shattered and broken hearted,

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. – Isaiah 57:15

This is the gift of living with conviction, we live convicted that the one speaking to us, is the Living Christ, and that we are the ones being spoken too. Parable ceases to be about actors and an audience, the foolish and wise: it becomes a love story between us and God full of revival, renewal, hope. And God is close at hand, close at heart.

I wonder where our church might need the Cornerstone to break us to pieces? What vail might need to be lifted? What foolishness might we need to walk away from?

I wonder where you, in an act of faith, might need the Cornerstone to break you into pieces? Where has your heart become fixed where it needs to be softened? How might your eyes be opened to the fruit hanging before you?

God sent a prophet on our behalf in we know ever lasting hope. He offers the fruits of the kingdom to those who place him as their Cornerstone. Pick them. Savor them. Offer up praise to The One who gives them. Then go you on your journey. But, trust me, don't get greedy and eat them all at once, show some discretion.

Just Take my word for it.

Amen.