

New Life Community Church, January 28, 2007: M2/W2 – Restorative Christian Ministries, Mission and Story

Thanks for the opportunity of being here this morning. We have long connections to this fellowship through having known the Goshulak's, the Ritchie's, the Carlson's, and others. At one point, we even considered being part of the Whattlekainum Housing Coop – and would likely have fellowshipped here in that case.

This is Missions Fest Sunday. It is with real gratitude that we express thanks to you for your regular financial support of our agency's mission, which we say is "mutually changing lives, one relationship at a time". Our mission for just over 40 years has been to work through our volunteers to meet needs in the criminal justice system. We celebrated that 40-year milestone in three events last fall. Our oldest program is prison visitation. We recruit, train, deploy and supervise volunteers to visit men and women regularly throughout their time of incarceration, then support them upon their return to the community.

Another program we do jointly with Catholic Charities is Circles of Support and Accountability. In this program, we work regularly with sex offenders who must be released from jail – at their "warrant expiry". We form a circle of four to seven volunteers who support and hold the released prisoner accountable. There are five such circles currently working in the Fraser Valley communities.

We also do a kind of crime prevention program in Chilliwack called Parent To Parent. Under the supervision of our part-time staff person, Maureen Donegan, volunteers work with parents of children in the 0 to 5 year range, helping socially isolated parents to raise their kids, to get them over the hump of the crucial life-forming first five years of their lives.

We run as well a Spiritual Care program under contract with the Ministry of Children and Family Development in Abbotsford. A staff person, Rufus Loewen, works part-time with all persons under the care or employ of the Abbotsford Ministry of Children and Family Development, to provide spiritual resources for living.

We are beginning this year – again! – to work with MDO's (Mentally Disordered Offenders) in one of the federal institutions through intentional training of our volunteers. We have done lots with this group over the years.

We dream of finding more ways of matching volunteer resources to people connected somehow to crime or its prevention. This includes victims of serious crime, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disordered prisoners, etc.

A Few Stories and The Grand Story

We just published for our 40th Anniversary Celebrations, a collection of stories entitled, *Whatever You Did For One... You Did For Me: Reflections from Forty Years of Service*".

I will read you portions of two of these stories.

Cindy & Astrid – p. 37

George & Romeo – p. 87

What larger Story is at back of these personal stories? It is the larger story to which all humanity is called to become part of: God's story of redemption and renewal for the entire creation. Living out this Grand Story to the world of course is also the central *mission* of God's people in the entire sweep of biblical revelation.

In a book by Walter Bruegemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, the author presents "that most simple, elemental story line that lies at the heart of biblical faith (p.23)." He says it is a story line that makes no attempt to prove itself true. It simply is true and is told with all the passion of *insider* believers. In the Hebrew story line, Bruegemann says believers recited a kind of story *credo* – what they always fell back on in times of need and crisis. A central instance of this *credo* is Exodus 15:1 – 18, part of which I'll read:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them. In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."

This is a central affirmation of Hebrew faith throughout its long journey with God.

We find much the same in the New Testament where a kernel of a narrative pulsates, giving us a central *kerygma* – proclamation – of the Gospel Story.

Two key texts in I Corinthians that give this bedrock belief of the Early Church are:

[B]ut we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:23 & 24)

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the

brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor 15:3-8)

The essentials of biblical faith are for the Hebrew people:

- promise of deliverance;
- powerful deliverance through the Red Sea;
- 40 years nurturing in the wilderness;
- God's ultimate guiding them to the *Promised Land*.

For New Testament people, this essential faith Story entails:

- Fulfillment of prophecies of the promised Christ/Messiah;
- Christ's birth of the seed of David;
- Christ's death as deliverance from the present evil age according to the Scriptures;
- Christ's burial;
- Christ's resurrection the third day according to the Scriptures;
- Christ's exultation at the "right hand of God" (with all power and authority) as Lord of the living and dead;
- Christ's promised return as Judge and Saviour of all humankind;
- The outpouring of the Spirit for all Christians for all remaining Time over which Christ is Lord.

J.R.R. Tolkien famed writer of *Lord of the Rings*, writes similarly of the Gospel Story, in which he uses a made-up word, *eucatastrophe*, meaning "Sudden Turn of Events for Good": [*Tree and Leaf*, p. 72]

This Story is essentially one that invites us into the narrative to live out two ultimate realities of our purpose, our mission, on earth: love God, love neighbour, on which two commandments Jesus said, "hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 22:40) all biblical revelation. We are to be ever living towards these two ultimate poles of human existence. This is the central mission of the church, modelled by Jesus, and stated by him in his simple yet powerful words,

"Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." The text continues with: "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:21-22)

The Gospel Story and Peacemaking

Peace and *reconciliation* in relation to God and neighbour are at the centre of the Judeo-Christian Story. Living out this story means living out in multitude ways the costly way of peace.

A major New Testament study just published last year on the missing *peace* – P E A C E – in the New Testament, likely to become the classic work for years to come, concludes with a manifesto on the centrality of peace and peacemaking to the mission of the church:

One reason that the world finds the New Testament's message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless... Only when the church renounces the way of violence, will people see what the Gospel means... The meaning of the New Testament's teaching on violence will become evident only in communities of Jesus' followers who embody the costly way of peace (Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, p. 429).¹

A similar major study on the meaning of the atonement – Christ's death on the cross – for the mission of the church concludes that "Peace and justice are rooted in the atoning work of Christ and are therefore integral to the gospel." (John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, p. 248). "The death of Christ is model for what Christians do about enemies, evil powers, the temptation to dominate... [we must respond with] generous self-giving sharing, servanthood, and love of enemies." (*ibid*, p. 249) Every Christian evangelist should be a peacemaker; every Christian peacemaker should be an evangelist.

M2/W2 and Restorative Justice

This "costly way of peace" has been applied to criminal justice in the concept of Restorative Justice. Until just over three decades ago, this vision of *peacemaking* not *warmaking* in response to crime was largely unheard of in Western criminal law. As it turns out, it has been present long-since in our Western culture though suppressed for a thousand years. And it has been in most of the world's cultures outside the West – a gift no doubt of God's common grace to humanity – despite the West's worldwide influence to suppress it in favour of greater punitive justice.

Restorative Justice in North America, birthplace in the mid-seventies of its worldwide expression from within criminal justice systems, grew out of a religious community, specifically the Mennonite community of Kitchener, Ontario, as an explicit Christian response to crime. I was fortunate to have been part of this early impetus towards peacemaking in response to crime through my work for many years with the Mennonite Central Committee Ontario in Kitchener, and later nationally with Mennonite Central Committee Ontario.

No culture exists without religious foundation, claims anthropologist René Girard. If, as Girard continues to explain, a "scapegoat mechanism" is generated by religion in all human cultures to address the problem of violence, by which victims are sacrificed to restore peace and social cohesion, then religion just may be the source of the corrective to universal scapegoating violence as well.

In the Story of the Gospels, in particular of the Cross of Christ, there is the revelation of a "scapegoat mechanism" in human culture Jesus died to subvert and overthrow, thereby

¹ Quoted in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*, pp. 331, 314, 343-344.

offering a *New Story*, a *counter-cultural* story of transformation in the language of Romans 12, to the cultures of the world – one that establishes in its telling a radically different set of cultural rules, summed up under the one biblical word, *agape* – love – as applicable equally to our personal and to our social and political lives.

For over 30 years, the terminology of “Restorative Justice” has had increasingly wider acceptance and resonance within criminal justice jurisdictions around the world. It is more than an alternative approach to criminal justice, rather a whole “paradigm shift”, a “third way” of seeing and responding to crime. It is the way of peace and peacemaking for all parties to crime: victim first, offender next, and impacted community and related criminal justice players engaged in responding to crime. A huge body of literature has emerged around this peacemaking response to crime.

At a most basic level, it calls for a different response to the “other”, the enemy, the criminal, the terrorist, the Communist, etc. If our worldview permits a division of life into permanent “them/us” categories as in a “War on Crime”, a “War on Terrorism”, then the way is opened for endless scapegoating of the “them”, of repeated sacrifice and slaughter of the enemy. This is the reality in warfare, and generally has been the case in what Nixon first called the “war on crime”. Such violence for a thousand years has been the dominant Western response to crime.

The bottom line of all such “wars” is human sacrifice that places Western civilization on par with the “civilizations” of the Aztecs and Incas of South America and other extremely violent, “primitive” civilizations of all history and place.

Executions still routinely carried out in the United States are at the extreme end of Western criminal law. One cultural observer writes: “... [E]xecution... ‘is a brutal act,’ but it is one carried out ‘in the name of civilization.’ It would be difficult to think of a more succinct summation of the underlying anthropological dynamic at work: *a brutal act done in the name of civilization*, an expulsion or execution that results in social harmony.” He suggests further: “If we humans become too morally troubled by the brutality to revel in the glories of the civilization made possible by it, we will simply have to reinvent culture... This is what Paul sensed when he declared the old order to be a dying one (I Cor 7:31).” The same writer believes that “This is the central anthropological issue of our age (Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 1995, p. 79).” By that he means: the central question for human civilization today is, *How do we overcome violence?*

In a brief publication by Mennonite Central Committee, my friend Vern Redekop asks generally of Western criminal law: “Is it possible that what we call a criminal justice system is really a scapegoat mechanism?” He continues later: “In a secular democratic society, nothing is as sacred as the law code and the justice system which enforces it. The buildings in which laws are made are the most elaborate and the courts in which decisions are made about points of law are the most stately. Formality, uniforms, and respect surround the agents of law.” He finally states baldly: “It is possible to think of the criminal justice system as one gigantic scapegoat mechanism for society.... [A] tiny

percentage of offenders who are severely punished can be thought of as a collective scapegoat for society (Vern Redekop, *Scapegoats, the Bible, and Criminal Justice: Interacting with René Girard*, 1993, pp. 1, 16, 33 & 34).”

The Good News is, the origin of the most profound anthropology of violence with a way out is the Gospel story. René Girard claims the Gospel Story is unique in this way amongst all world literature. The myths that justify violence in all cultures begin to evaporate under the strong rays of Gospel glare.

Sadly however, since the eleventh century, the same biblical texts were interpreted often to endorse violence, to endorse a “mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood (Timothy Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 1996, p. 102).” It is in fact this understanding of the Gospel Story that gives rise to the dominant form of Western criminal justice: *punitive retributive justice*.

In early biblical Christianity and the Church Fathers, it is the devil who – illegitimately – insists on the payment of the debt incurred by humankind. Saint Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century inverts this. Now it is God who, legitimately, exacts the payment of debt. In both Old and New Testaments an indebted person could be ‘redeemed’ by the payment of his or her debt. Jesus, following Deuteronomy, insists on the cancelling of debt as a fundamental aspect of Christian practice. Anselm, however, makes God the one who *insists* on debt payment. The debt humanity has incurred must be paid with human blood. The God who in Christ “once and for all” rejected sacrifice now demands it. From the start sacrifice and satisfaction run together. The God who liberates from law is now, in Anselm, understood as personified law. What remains as said already, is a “mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood.”

In this reading of the Bible a most fundamental inversion of the Gospel is achieved, which prepares the way for the validation of criminal law as the instrument of God’s *punitive justice* instead of what it is in the Gospel, an alienating construction which is at best a tragic necessity – the very opposite of a law in the service of reconciliation and peace, which pulsates throughout the New Testament. (Based on *ibid*, pp. 102 & 103).

In the West, by the birth of the modern prison in the late eighteenth century, and persisting to the present, what emerged was a penal system dedicated to a “mysticism of pain” – *with rarely any redemption*. (That is why by contrast the Stephen King novel, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (1982), and movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) with Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, are so gripping!) Though ironically, the first modern prison in Philadelphia in 1790 was proposed as a place of *penitence* – certainly a valid biblical practice, and hence the new term from that time, *penitentiary* – a place for prisoners to become *penitent*. In its sheer dehumanization, horror and brutality, the modern prison generally became anything but, right from its inception.

There was in the West for the past thousand years little place for reintegration of the offender into the community. No redemption, no reintegration. Western Criminal Justice lost sight of community, healing, redemption, restoration, reintegration, and peacemaking – in a word: *love*.

Conclusion

I must bring this to a close. What have I said? I think it is this:

- *First*, the church's central mission is to endlessly tell and live out the Story of salvation that dominates Scripture. It is to invite all peoples to write themselves into this unique Narrative of the Ages, to be profoundly shaped and transformed by the Story, the only Story that will ultimately take us home. This is the *Godward* pole of Christian existence as we passionately worship God in sheer gratitude for his costly initiative of grace towards us.
- *Second*, the central motif of this Story is peace and peacemaking: peace that begins with God in Christ through the Cross, and peace that flows out to all humanity without exception. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that there is simply *no future without forgiveness*. This is the *humanward* pole of Christian existence.
- *Third*, in application to criminal justice, this Story runs counter to all violent punitive responses to crime. It is a profoundly peacemaking way. It is the way of Restorative Justice.

I will conclude with a Restorative Justice story and a brief reading from Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was martyred in El Salvador in 1980 for his faithfulness to the Gospel Story.

The Story of Bobby

Bobby committed terrible crimes of incest over 25 years ago. He served 15 years in prison for those crimes, becoming involved in our program early on. Upon initially being paroled, he was rejected first by the city of Prince George, then by Toronto. In each case, a huge outcry forced him to leave for his own personal safety. John Kastner produced a video about this for CBC entitled, "Hunting Bobby Oatway".

Bobby was eventually forced to seek haven back in jail. Because of the video, one attempt was made on his life there. He lived in fear of return to society.

In June, 1999, he was released on a "warrant expiry", meaning there were no correctional controls on him. After his release, the police secured a court-ordered set of conditions. He went to live in the interior of BC.

On July 11, 1999, a Town Meeting that turned ugly forced Bobby out once again.

No one was interested to know that Bobby in prison had taken every treatment course possible, then himself had paid for further counselling on the outside. No one wanted to hear that he was deeply remorseful for his past crimes, and personally was committed NEVER AGAIN to reoffend.

Bobby subsequently became part of a community-based “Circle of Support and Accountability”, with full endorsement and engagement of the local police and other authorities. After one year, the Circle disbanded, but Oatway had made a new life – one without his victims constantly pursuing him, without a fearful community rejecting him. Under a different name, he has ever since lived as a crime-free, gainfully employed, and functioning member of society. I stay regularly in touch with him.

This is only partial Restorative Justice since his victims are still wounded and unhealed. What would make it a more complete story would be an opportunity for Oatway to fully confess the horror of his sexual offending against his victims, ask their forgiveness in a way that would satisfy them of his authenticity, and their consequent moving on with their lives – which “letting go”/transcending might be all the forgiveness one can hope for.

Oscar Romero Reading

Where do you and I fit into all this with our little lives? Mother Teresa would say simply, “We are not called to do great things, rather little things with great love.” This is variation of our confession at the end of the day, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.” (Luke 17:10)

Now please listen to this reflection, and reflect in turn again on where you fit into the Grand Story of the Ages.