

Seeing Through a Different Lens

March 1, 2020

For the last month I have been teaching a chaplaincy course in Regina two days a week. The course is centered in the Santa Maria Senior Citizen's home in south Regina. Four of the six students are functioning as spiritual care providers in Santa Maria or in other long term care facilities in southern Saskatchewan. I have taught chaplaincy courses, formally known as Clinical Pastoral Education, for over twenty years but never in a long term care setting. As many of the residents in these facilities are living with dementia I thought it would be important to supplement my knowledge with some reading in that area. In the process I came across a book entitled *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, by the Scottish Pastoral Theologian John Swinton.

I was surprised by the first few chapters of his book in which he chastised pastoral writers and spiritual care givers for using a medical perspective as the first lens for understanding people living with dementia. Indeed, in the first week of class, we brought in a psychiatric nurse who explained the medical etiology of dementia and its related conditions such as Alzheimer's Disease. Swinton argues that while medical information can be useful, it is not the first lens the spiritual care giver should look through. He argues that medicine describes people living with dementia from a perspective of deficits where limitations and losses are highlighted.

Swinton argues that spiritual care givers need to do something very common in the pages of scripture, something he calls "redescription". Redescription involves seeing something through a different lens. Redescription is something that our friend Tom Powell insisted upon during his days as Chaplain at the Oliver Lodge long term care facility. I heard Tom correct more than one student, and even a few of his colleagues, when we made the mistake of calling people living in Oliver Lodge "patients." Tom insisted upon redescribing these individuals as residents, rather than patients, arguing that Oliver Lodge was their home and that most of their daily activities were about living not about medical treatment. In Tom's view, residents in Oliver Lodge were first and foremost people continuing to live the lives that they were able to live. Redescription recognizes that there are many ways to view a situation; many windows to look through when we see another person. Some of the medical staff still thought of those folks in Oliver Lodge as 'patients'; Tom insisted that they were 'residents'; to visitors these residents were better known as mother or father, as husband or wife with all the relational history that implied. I even heard one clear-thinking resident living with Multiple Sclerosis redescribe herself as a "source of income" for those who were employed to care for her. Redescription invites the recognition that life should be viewed from many perspectives if we are to have as complete a picture as possible.

This is the first Sunday in the Christian liturgical season of Lent, that forty day period that runs from last Wednesday (Ash Wednesday) through to Good Friday and Easter. Most years I find myself returning, on this first Sunday of Lent, to the scripture passage read today from the Hebrew Bible. In this passage, the prophet Isaiah redescribes fasting – a long time practice of Christian people during this Lenten season.

The book of the prophet Isaiah is really three books in one. Scholars think that the book was written by three different authors, at three different historical moments, with three different purposes. First Isaiah warns the people that they have fallen away from God and as a result they will be subdued by invading armies. Second Isaiah offers a message of hope to the people who have been oppressed and living under siege – God will comfort and save them. It would appear that Third Isaiah (the author of this morning's passage) is speaking to a people who have now returned to their homeland and feel favoured by God. They come to believe that if they perform certain rituals God will continue to bless them.

In this morning's passage the ritual the people have been engaging in is the ritual of fasting and, not only fasting, but it appears that they have also been putting on sackcloth and pouring ashes over their heads. They have come to believe that God grants favours in response to rituals. At the beginning of this morning's reading we learn that the people are complaining because God doesn't seem to be responding to their fasting. It is at this point that Isaiah, speaking for God, engages in a redescription. He tells the people that fasting isn't about doing without food or sitting in ashes. He redescribes the fast in this way:

Is this not the fast that (God) chooses: to loose the bonds of injustice
 To undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 And bring the homeless poor into your house?
 When you see the naked, to cover them
 And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Isaiah challenges the people with this redescription. Instead of seeing themselves as deserving special favour **from** God they are challenged to see themselves as acting in consort **with** God. Instead of engaging in ritualistic activities to **gain** God's blessing, they are challenged to engage in real-life activity to **create** God's blessing for others. This is the redescription of fasting.

We are living about 3,000 years after this piece of scripture was written and yet Isaiah's redescription has some relevance for our lives of faith. It may be easy for us to mistake our rituals – an Ash Wednesday service, a Lenten lunch, a Thursday handwashing, an Easter sunrise service as pleasing to God. Yet these activities are as much about us as they are about God – we are blessed by being in community, we have an opportunity to still our hearts in worship; we experience the holy. Don't get me wrong – I do not want to do away with these services or to suggest that whatever personal Lenten practices you engage in are without benefit. It is just that Isaiah's redescription of fasting suggests that piety is not the same as practice, and that religious ritual is not intended to be an end in itself. At the beginning of Lent we hear these ancient words anew: "Is not the fast that (God) chooses for you, to loose the bonds of injustice?"

Last year we read this same passage on the first Sunday of Lent and spent a number of Sunday's that followed considering the plight of children in some of the

world's most troubling places – on the borders of Palestine; in the villages of Uganda; in Indigenous First Nation schools. This year your ministry team once again wants to invite you into the kind of fasting that Isaiah describes, we want to journey with you into a place where we might begin to “loose the bonds of injustice.”

We are suggesting that we fast together through these Sundays of Lent by engaging the wisdom that arises from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and consider the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. In many ways this kind of fast will involve us in a process of redescription. At the outset this morning I highlighted my learnings about redescription in relation to those living in long term care. I explained that our relationship is very much shaped by the lens through which we look. I could look at a person and conclude that they experienced vascular dementia that was limiting the capacity of the frontal lobe of their brain inhibiting their executive function resulting in numerous deficits for living. Or I could look at a person as a member of a community of elders who reside together for care and safety and are living as fully as their brain functioning allows. Or I could look at a person as a mother and wife whose physical being is a symbol of all that she had been in the life of those who still love her. Or I could look at a resident of a long term care facility and recognize the transactional relationship between her need for care and the caregiver whose daily work results in income and sustenance for his family. Redescription has the capacity to drastically expand our viewpoint and therefore our understanding.

During our Lenten fast we will have the opportunity to redescribe our experience of Indigenous persons. Some of our society's worst descriptions of Indigenous people have risen to the surface in recent weeks following the action of the Wetsuweten chiefs and their supporters. Laura recently shared a Facebook post in which unknown contributors used words like ‘welfare bums’ and ‘criminals’ to describe Indigenous persons suggesting that should be arrested or shot or run over by trains. While such comments reflect a radical fringe in our society, yesterday's Star-Phoenix featured a country wide survey in which more than half of our population continue to see Indigenous persons as “other” and their struggle for full personhood as illegitimate. Isaiah's 3000 year old term of being burdened by “a yoke of oppression” is the reality for some many Indigenous persons. While many of us condemn and distance ourselves from racist remarks, it is too easy to continue to view Indigenous persons through a lens of additction, or illiteracy or economic slothfulness.

Fasting for justice demands we be open to redescribing our experience of and with indigenous persons. What would happen if westerners saw the alienation of Indigenous persons as credible as their own experience of alienation? What if Canadians saw Indigenous persons as wonderfully adaptive for their ability to be the first to navigate and live in our diverse and sometimes harsh climate? What if we looked through a lens at their practice of honouring the land and its resources as the earliest of environmental efforts? What if we saw their kinship system in which kokum's happily care for their grandchildren and mooshims still teach the young about the Creator, as something to model? Can we redescribe our relationship with Indigenous persons? Can we actually make legitimate attempts to enter a spirit of reconciliation?

As worship leaders living in the tradition of Isaiah we invite you to join us on this path of redescription. In the Sundays to come we invite you to open yourselves to the Christian practice of redescription in which God wipes the scales away from our eyes and gives the opportunity to see our world anew. If we can see the world anew we will be ready for the resurrection of a new way of being declared at Easter Sunrise. Isaiah concludes that after a fast of justice then, “your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing will spring up” for all to see. Might it be so. Amen.

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