

“A Fair Country?”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading

from Meg Barnhouse’s book *Broken Buddha*

I was checking out at the Family Dollar store, six cents short at the register. Usually if you’re just a penny shy of what you need they will say, “Don’t worry about it.” Six cents, though, that’s more than a “don’t worry about it” amount. Digging through my pockets for the rest and coming up empty, I turned to apologize to the man behind me for holding up the line. He looked tired; his mahogany skin, his clothes, and his work boots were all filmed grey with cement dust. He hadn’t shaved in several days. His sweatshirt had a couple of holes in it where his T-shirt showed through.

“Sorry,” I said.

“What you need?” he asked.

“Six cents,” the clerk and I said together. Then she said, “Listen, it’s okay.”

At the same time he said, “I got you.”

“Thanks,” I said to the clerk and to the man at the same time.

“It’s no problem,” he said.

If I were to stop telling it here, this could make a good simple story. If I were not over-responsible, a firstborn, a Virgo, raised with Scots Protestant values, it could have ended like that. Instead, what happened next was that I went out to my car and rooted through the change compartment, found six pennies, went back in, and put them on the counter. “Here you go,” I said, turned around, and walked back out.

“I coulda got you,” he said, to my back.

I could not have driven out of that parking lot having taken anything from those two people. I didn’t want them watching my taillights, musing about how a middle-class

white woman took six cents off them without looking back. I think now that it might have felt more respectful to accept the gift with thanks.

I have been chewing over this, asking myself questions about it. Would I have accepted six cents from a white-skinned man standing in the line behind me? A white-skinned woman? A dark-skinned woman? Would I have taken six cents from a friend? “Yes” to that last one. “No” to everyone else. Never. I didn’t realize I was so stiff-necked. What would it have hurt to owe another person a little, walking out of that store? Am I pretending that I’m self-sufficient in this world? It’s an illusion some wealthier people can preserve for a little while, at least. Would I have accepted an offer of help carrying something heavy to my car? Yes. He looked rich in physical strength, more than I was. I would have gladly accepted help from his wealth, but not from an area in which I assumed he was poorer than I. Allowing someone to help me out of their weaker place is too hard. It would be like me offering to carry something for him to his car. What a tangled mess all of this is.

I tell people that it is good to learn to accept help as well as to help. It’s good practice for times of sickness or when we are less physically able at certain times. If we are hard to help, our helpers not only have to help us, they have to endure our grumpiness and outrage at needing help, our snappishness and embarrassment. It’s easier for most of us to be the helper. I wouldn’t think anything of giving someone six cents in line, even a dollar or two. I’m hoping that after a few more spiritual growth cycles I can be the kind of person who could accept six cents from another human on the planet so that person could feel a little good about helping somebody else at the end of a long day laying concrete. It would be just a little change, and what’s so hard about that?

Sermon: “A Fair Country?”

We’ve all seen the jarring images by now.

Pink insulation covered with black mould.

Cracked tiles and missing floorboards.

Tarps and tents turned into permanent shelter.

Children living without heating, housing, or running water.

Each image conveys the bitter bite of winter, though it’s only December.

Every scene reveals the persistent power of poverty.

Each picture a haunting reminder of how very far we have yet to go to fulfill not only the promise of this great country,

but to fulfill the great promises made long ago and at so many points along the way to the First Peoples of this land we call Canada.

Over these last few days and weeks, as the images from Attawapiskat have entered my home and my heart, I haven't always known exactly what to think, or, for that matter, *how* to think about all of this, but I have been painfully aware of how I feel.

Like you, and like so many, I have experienced a range of emotions: shock and horror, outrage and revulsion, guilt and a profound sense of shame.

“We are better than this,” I have said to myself, more than once.

Beyond all the blaming and finger-pointing, though, I have been heartened to hear, at least below the surface of all the rhetoric, almost universal agreement that such deplorable conditions, even in the remotest reserves, are simply unacceptable.

It is clearly a source of national shame that Canadians anywhere live in the squalour we have seen on such vivid display over these past few weeks.

More concerning, though, is the knowledge that Attawapiskat is not alone. There are another hundred reserves in a similar state of dilapidated desperation across this country.

And, though Attawapiskat is the first to garner such headlines during the time I've lived in Canada, it's been hard to learn that such headlines come and go every few years here—bringing, each time, another round of hand-wringing, gut-checking, and navel-gazing.

The cycle seems pretty well established; the pattern all too predictable.

It is clear by now that there aren't likely any simple solutions.

And, so, we are left to wonder whether and how this moment, this unbearably uncomfortable moment will come to anything, if we will learn something this time 'round—

if maybe, just maybe, this time will be different,
that, finally, we may get it right.

There is some cause for hope.

Fifteen modular homes, at a cost of \$1.2 million are reportedly
now on their way north to James Bay.

Another half-million dollars will be spent
to bring heating and plumbing to five additional homes.

At just under \$2 million, it might be tempting,
especially for the government, right about now,
to pronounce the problem solved, all in time for Christmas.

But, while the most immediate threats of the crisis in Attawapiskat
are being resolved for this winter, we all know that this situation
is far more complicated than what the delivery of a few new trailers
and five wood stoves can possibly fix.

A bit more encouraging, was the news, on Thursday,
that a summit meeting will be held in late January
between the Prime Minister and several Aboriginal leaders
to discuss a way forward in the relationship
between Canada and its Indigenous Peoples.

While this is a promising sign—and comes not a moment too soon,
given that this is the first such meeting held under this government—
I fear that this summit, and those that will surely someday follow,
will amount to very little until and unless there is a radical realignment
in the way that we who are non-Indigenous regard those who are.

A move in the right direction would require
seeing this not as some sort of pesky problem to be solved, once and for all,
but, instead, as a vital, life-giving relationship that must be repaired—
not merely for those people, up there,
living on some remote plot of land that most of us will never see,
but for the well-being of all of us who call this country home.

Last summer, when I began planning this sermon—
long before the crisis in Attawapiskat came to light—

I hoped to share with you this morning some reflections about indigenous rights through the prism of John Ralston Saul's book *A Fair Country*.

The timing of the housing crisis among the Cree of James Bay only makes this sermon more timely, and, hopefully, a bit more relevant.

In his book, Saul brings together his life as a public intellectual in this country and his experience of being married to Adrienne Clarkson during her term as Governor General to reflect, as he has now for years and across several not-so-easy-to-read books, about the state of things in Canada.

I had the good fortune of leading a discussion of this book last year with a great group of people from our congregation, who, for four weeks, were my unwitting tutors as I tried to make sense of the text.

The most compelling argument Saul makes is that Canada is a Métis nation—a country with not two great founding cultures, but three.

He says that Canada is not primarily a “European” nation, created in the image of France and Great Britain, but Métis, in the sense that our values, ideas, and institutions have been and are still being shaped by the encounter between Canada's immigrants and its Indigenous Peoples.

In his own words, he says, “The underlying currents of this country, are more indigenous than imported....”

“[Our] central inspiration... is aboriginal... How we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together, how we treat one another when we are not being stupid is [all] deeply aboriginal.”

Canada has been guided by what he sees as central aboriginal ideas: “egalitarianism, a proper balance between individual and group, and a penchant for negotiation over violence.”

He says that our resistance to recognising Canada's Métis identity,

our failure to come to terms with this as Canada's true founding story, leaves us confused and not really sure of who we are— and deprives Canada of the self-confidence it needs to be the progressive power in the world that it could and should be.

He worries that “Canada is in trouble [today] because it has [come] untethered from its aboriginal moorings.”

As a recovering American, as I read Saul's book, and as I studied the text with the class, my guiding question was, “Is it true?”

Although I have made it a high priority to study Canadian history, I was left asking myself, is this alternative read of history really real?

Is Canada truly a Métis nation?

Does this country's relatively easy embrace of multiculturalism stem from generations of indigenous influence— from the aboriginal idea of an ever-expanding, but inclusive circle that welcomes in the other?

Does the indigenous pillar of this country's history explain the Canadian habit of finding the third way, a middle path, of speaking with a voice of conciliation and working toward consensus?

Does the Great Peace of Montreal, in 1701, where aboriginal ambassadors from forty nations and the leaders of New France committed to “eat from a Common Bowl”— where they promised to look after one another—explain why Canadians are so proud today of universal health care at home and of peace-keeping around the globe?

I don't know. I don't have all the answers, and I'm not completely convinced that Saul does either.

There are some who have accused him of writing revisionist history, of attempting to create a new foundational myth for Canada.

Some of that may well be true.
(He does have a way with a sentence!)
But, I'm not so sure that that is such a bad thing.

There is power in the stories we tell.

There is power in which stories we tell.
And, there is power in how we chose to tell the stories that we have.

Saul is right. Canada's story doesn't make sense
when told only in French or English or both.

A vital part of understanding the true fabric of this country
involves appreciating how the characteristic "ways of being" within aboriginal culture
have been woven into the lives of all of us living here.

Whether Saul's claims are completely, historically true or not
now seem a bit beside the point.

What seems more important is recognising the potential, the promise,
the possibility that exists in making this beautiful version of the story true,
of honouring our indigenous foundations
alongside those that have been imported.

The history of Canada is still being written.

We still have the opportunity to recognise the many ways
Indigenous Peoples have given shape to this country.

And, we have the chance, once again,
to ask what kind of country we want for this to be.

It is a question that comes to us every day.

It is a question people seek to answer
when protesting the proposed mega-quarry
or the growing financial inequality in our society.

It is a question we seek to answer when voting,
and when we recoil from the images coming out of Attawapiskat,
but chose, ultimately, not to turn away.

Is this the Canada we want?

In this country born from dialogue rather than revolution,
it is a question we must ask over and over again.

One of my favourite answers to this question came from Joseph Brant, the leader of the Mohawk Six Nations, as he gave an impassioned argument for what the future of our shared civilisation should be.

His remarks to a largely Anglophone audience, pointed to the choices that were at stake.

With no shortage of irony, he said:

“In the government you call civilized, the happiness of the people is constantly sacrificed to the splendour of empires. Hence your codes of criminal and civil laws have their origin; hence your dungeons and prisons.”

I will not enlarge on an idea,” he said, “so singular in civilized life. [But,] among us we have no prisons.”

I don’t know about you, but oh, how I wish Joseph Brant’s voice had been heard in Parliament last week before a majority in the House voted in support for the Omnibus Crime Bill.

I would rather we spend money to educate and house our poorest citizens rather than prepare for the day when we will warehouse them in prisons.

Earlier, I said I felt a radical realignment of how we see Indigenous People will be required if we are ever to move beyond the failures in Canada’s relationship with its First Nations.

That realignment involves coming to see a shared history and a shared destiny.

It involves coming to see Aboriginal people as they are, beyond the stereotypes, but without romanticizing them.

As Sandra Leronde of Red Sky Theatre puts it: “we are more than our issues.”

The story by Meg Barnhouse that I shared earlier, about being six cents short, really said it all—about what it means to see others as they are,

to allow ourselves to be vulnerable,
to lean on those with less,
and to receive graciously what is given.

That kind of work is at the heart of the realignment I'm suggesting,
and it is the stuff of spiritual growth,
for us as individuals, as much as it is for us as a country.

I have little hope that things will fundamentally change until
we come to see that we have as much or more to learn from our Indigenous Peoples
as we may think they have to learn from us.

In the meantime, as we make whatever progress is possible,
this faith calls us to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person
and to honour the web of life in which we live.

Ensuring the fundamental right to the basics of life for all, then,
is not merely a matter of governance, but a deeply spiritual matter, as well.

The evidence, for me, is the way that the crisis in Attawapiskat
has touched our hearts.

We know we are better than this,
but we have work to do, if we are to make that true.

For some of us that work will involve writing letters for Amnesty upstairs,
for others it will be signing up on the list in the foyer to get involved in a group
working for indigenous rights, others will write cheques,
and some will say a prayer.

Whatever action you take, don't let this day end
without giving thought to what your own heart is calling you to do.

Finally, I want to say, because it might not be abundantly clear,
that this sermon is actually a love letter to Canada,
written from the core of my faith.

When I think of what kind of country I want this to be,
my mind is flooded with images that show to me
what this country already is and what it may yet become.

The two most poignant images I have both involve First Nations.

The first is the image of the Prime Minister rising in the House of Commons in 2008, before chiefs in full regalia sitting at the centre of the chamber, to apologise for the pain and suffering of the Residential Schools.

I wept watching it unfold on television, and to my surprise,
I wept a few weeks later, as I told a group of American ministers about it.
Though I was very new to this country, I was deeply moved
by what was clearly a moment that had been a very long time in coming.

The second image is a happier one.
It is from the Vancouver Olympics and the brief but powerful moment
when the camera was trained on the box where heads of state were seated.

There, next to Michaëlle Jean, in their rightful place,
were the chiefs of the four host First Nations.

It was a glimpse, if we were to summon our better angels,
of what we might at last become: a fair country.

Sooner than later, so may it be.

Amen.