

“History of a Nation, Future of a Congregation”

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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.

Recently, while reading the front section of the *Globe and Mail*, I opened to the centerfold, and saw a page of pictures all exhibiting makeshift memorials in Quebec City. Pictures of handwritten signs, expressing “La Paix, L’amour et La solidarite”, hashtags stating #Allhumans, one that stated “It won’t divide us,” and another that had the six names of the men who were killed in the shooting on January 29th. The article, posted below these 12 images of a traumatized community was called “We are not Immune” and it was written by Adrienne Clarkson, the 26th Governor General of Canada. Clarkson’s article is a reminder to its readers that Canadians are not immune to the opinions and actions of our neighbours to the south. She states that “we are not immune to seeing the ugliness, and to hearing the appalling messages. Even if we know them to be untrue, to be false, to be lies, we still hear them.”

The article went on to describe many of the actions, and ideas that Canada has not been immune to over its long history: actions such as turning Jewish people away, people who sought refuge just before WW2. Similarly turning away Sikhs in the early 20th century, when a ship of 376 passengers arrived in Vancouver British Columbia and only 24 people were allowed to disembark. Or the actions of exiling Japanese Canadians to the interior of the country, taking away their human rights, confiscating their property, right after Japan entered World War 2. And of course the country’s continued disregard for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Clarkson stated, “This country has always had to fight against prejudice and shortsightedness, and we continue to do so. The health of our society means that we have continued to do so. We must never become complacent and think that we are better than anybody else because our country just happens not to be a place where you can buy an assault rifle down the street or where everyone carries a pistol in their glove compartment. We must remember that we are not immune from racism and from taking away human rights.” Adrienne Clarkson has an intimate knowledge of how susceptible to racism Canadians can be.

She immigrated from Hong Kong to Canada in 1942 when she was three years old and hers was the only family of Chinese decent on that Red Cross ship travelling

across the Pacific Ocean. She explains that at the time she arrived, Canada was still operating under the Chinese Exclusion Act, which “discouraged the Immigration from countries that were not white, and particularly Chinese.” But when they arrived they were granted passage to Canada, where they moved to Ottawa and she has been a citizen of Ontario since.

We can see from recent events that we have not been immune to the threats of racism, fear, hatred, and violence. It would be nice to believe that the actions that took place on January 29th in Quebec City were an isolated situation. It would be easy to blame them on the extremism and radical shifts that have begun south of our borders. But Canada has a long history of these situations. Sometimes done by individual people and sometimes done by the government. I have spent the last several years studying the Canadian history of colonization, or more specifically the creating of Treaty 7, which was the treaty land of Calgary, where I lived for more than 18 years. But I have also been learning about the so called discovery of Canada as well.

Stories told of the many Europeans traveling to this continent, settlers looking for a better life, attempting to escape poverty or persecution often for their religious beliefs. Refugees escaping across waters is and was a common practice. And while many who travelled across the Atlantic Ocean were refugees, they were mere passengers on exploration voyages. Many of these explorations were in search for a way to China. One such explorer, Martin Frobisher, tried to get to China by travelling across the north. But there were only a few months each year when a ship could pass because of ice buildups. Many of the explorers didn't make it, some died trying and Martin Frobisher almost did too. He was very lucky to make it to Newfoundland before the ice closed his exit route. The Aboriginal people that first met him gave him and his travelers fish and their traditional bread. In Newfoundland Frobisher held a formal ceremony of thanksgiving to celebrate their safe passage.

But alongside these stories of safekeeping and collaboration, there are stories of terror and trauma, like those of residential schools that were developed all over the country. Schools where students were taken away from their families (sometimes with blessing, but often against their parents' will) and taught how to be a civilized member of society. Taught to read from a bible, taught to pray the Lord's Prayer, taught that they were dirty and they would become clean through these lessons.

One of the things that I keep finding, over and over in the stories that I read, stories about this time of residential schooling, but also stories of any of the “first contacts” that were made, was that they were of often times of excitement, thanksgiving, and

joy – but somewhere along the way the relationships start to deteriorate, the differences are more drastic than the similarities are connecting.

This trope can be seen playing out time and time again. A trope is a storytelling device that offers a short cut for describing situations that an audience would readily recognize. If I were to say “Star-crossed lovers” immediate ideas and knowledge would come to your mind about the type of relationship that we are looking at. The same would happen if I said “Fallen Hero.”

All of these stories about the history of Canada suggest to me that there is another Trope that we need to add to our consciousness. A story of welcoming strangers, inviting them to participate in our community and engaging with them to a certain point, and then ostracizing them.

Stories like Clarkson wrote about in the *Globe and Mail* article. Or like the story of excluding Aboriginal people to reservations, and requiring them to stay or to lose their status. And these stories are not all in our long ago past. There are continued stories about this struggle, stories about refugees coming to Canada, and after the one year of financial support they are still unable to find work, they are unable to find adequate housing, and for some they are unable to speak English, because there are not enough opportunities to learn it. Stories of immigrant families living here for decades, being welcomed into the community, and becoming full citizens of Canada, and then being attacked and killed at their house of worship. We are not immune. Canada is not immune, Canadians are not immune.

So how do we change this Trope? How do we change this idea that there is celebration for the newcomers, and then we come to disregard, disengage, or even disgust one another after the honeymoon phase is over? How do we overcome our very human tendency to extricate ourselves from situations that are uncomfortable and hard, in order to maintain our self comfort? How can we do better, and stop the story before we become disenchanting?

A November 2015 *Maclean's* article captured an interview between the journalist and Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi discussing Syrian Refugees. The journalist, Aaron Wherry, asked of Nenshi, “In another interview, you said, ‘I think the way we manage ourselves over the next several months will really be defining for us as a nation.’ First of all, what specifically did you mean by that—what about the next few months is going to be determinative?” Nenshi responded: “What I specifically mean is, how we welcome the refugees that arrive... We’re going to have a whole bunch of new Canadians and we’re going to have probably more than a thousand new Calgarians. And we have to make sure that when they get here, we give them every possible fair

shake they can have to live a great life here.” He goes on to talk about how the City of Calgary Council Members had begun to work with their citizens to determine how they were going to house, and employ the many new people that would arrive in their city. Nenshi goes on to describe a meeting he had convened earlier that day. He says “... I had a meeting this morning where we had a community forum on refugees. And I was a little bit nervous walking in because it was an open invitation, anybody could come, and I thought there might be some angry people or people with a lot of very difficult questions. And who was there were churches and synagogues and temples and mosques and grandmothers and volunteers and people from across the community, who were just asking the same question ... how can I help? And at one point a First Nations woman stood up. I only knew that because she said, ‘I am a First Nations woman’ [and] I thought she was going to say, ‘why are we having all this focus on these refugees when we have so many problems closer to home?’ [but] what she actually said was, ‘I need some help. Because I need to understand how and when they’re coming because I want to make sure, and many of my First Nations colleagues want to make sure, that when these people come, we have an opportunity to have the elders there to drum them in and to do a smudge ceremony so we can welcome them to this land.’ I might have lost it at that point.”

This simple action, one that speaks of love and speaks of a justice that is yet unrealized, this is where we need to go. This is where we break down those Tropes. This is how we change the ending of the story.

Although the news article written by Adrienne Clarkson reminds us of some of Canada’s worst ideas and decisions, Clarkson finishes it with these statements: “Sometimes systems are not enforced, sometimes they are neglected and sometimes people benefit... Canada has always been a country where we were able to adjust... We must always be the kind of country that understands that other people have brought different stories and different narratives to this country. We must respect their stories, as we ask them to respect ours. And, above all, we all belong together. We are one family.” May it be so. May we make it so.