

April 12, 2009
JP aulm ullen
Scarboro United Church
Calgary, AB

"Easter- It's About Reconciliation"

"In groups" and "out groups". How much time and energy do we spend being clear about what divides us from others?

You may not have heard this week about the great Billy Bob Thornton controversy. Billy Bob, an Oscar-winning actor, has a band, the Boxmasters, and was about to perform in a few Canadian cities as a warm-up band for Willie Nelson. The Boxmasters were interviewed on the CBC Radio program, *Q*, by the host, Jan Ghomeshi. Apparently the producers of the show were told that Billy Bob's acting career was not to be mentioned. Jan, who claims she wasn't aware of these instructions, proceeded to ask if Billy Bob's career as an actor affected his transition to become a musical performer. Billy Bob began giving irrelevant, almost incomprehensible, responses to Jan's questions. In the end, Billy Bob referred to Canada as "mashed potatoes without the gravy."

Well, nothing unifies Canadians like some arrogant "a-a-a-actor" cum musician dissing our country - mashed potatoes without the gravy indeed! I understand he's cancelled the rest of his band's Canadian tour - a little less gravy for him. And when his next movie opens here? We'll find out who's the gravy and who's the meatball! Happy Easter, Billy Bob.

Well, maybe that is not quite the Easter spirit. Let's try again.

Unity, it's not just a town in Saskatchewan! Canada has been and continues to be an example to the world showing how diverse multicultural groups can live together and still honour and retain their culture and traditions. In a melting pot where everyone is expected to submerge their national origins and blend in.

True, that diversity has increased and changed radically over the last twenty years or so. True, our tolerance is being put to the test more frequently as more divergent ethnic and religious groups make their home here. Still, so far, so good. As our principles and practices are put to the test we develop new and hopefully deeper understandings, deeper commitments to those attitudes, beliefs and practices that bring us and hold us together.

That brings us to Easter. Easter is not just about a stone mysteriously moved. Easter is not just about an empty tomb. Both are important symbols in a story laden with meaning. Symbols that can help us address our own emptiness and the emptiness of much of what society seems to think is important, and God's odd way of making a point. Powerfully true stories if not historical fact.

What we can say with absolute certainty about that first Easter Sunday is that it was a powerfully transforming experience for Jesus's disciples. From frightened, defeated and disillusioned quitters they were changed into spiritual champions and their influence was felt throughout the Middle East in their lifetimes and has continued to expand over the past two thousand years.

We can also say that the story of Jesus's resurrection meant something different to early Christians than to many Christians today.

When Jesus died, he died as a Jew among Jewish people. A charismatic teacher, healer and political leader he was executed by the Roman government as a non-violent troublemaker. That should have been the end of it. It usually was when Rome made an example of someone or some group. It might have been so had not his followers begun to experience his presence and struggled to make sense of their own disillusionment. How could one so promising come to such a bad ending? Hebrew Scripture puts it bluntly, "cursed is anyone who hangs from a tree."

In those days animal sacrifice was a central part of the theology and worship of the temple throughout the Roman Empire and very much so in Jerusalem. Many people believed that when bad things happened to you it was because of sin. God or the gods were annoyed at your sin and you were being punished for your bad behaviour. The way to stop or prevent punishment, or to seek favour, was to make sacrifices in a temple. For the Jewish people sacrifices could only be made in Jerusalem. Regardless of the location or the god in question, the more valuable the animal sacrificed, the greater the forgiveness or the chance of future success. It is not hard to see how Jesus's death, especially having happened in Jerusalem, was interpreted in sacrificial terms. Jesus was the sacrificial offering. His death was payment for the sins of the world, atonement writ large, those who believed in him would be exempt from death because Jesus had put them in God's good books. Christianity started to become a means to get into heaven after death and very little else. Belief in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus began to be the test which separated Christians from other faiths and, ultimately and sadly, separated some Christians from other Christians.

I hope I have been fair to the theology of atonement, as it is called. I don't pretend to be an expert in it as it is not a theology that speaks to me personally.

There are other understandings of Jesus's death in the Bible however, that do speak to me. One that was very important in the spread of Christianity beyond Judaism and throughout the Middle East was that of reconciliation. By the time the Apostle Paul was active, God's reconciling action leading to transformation had become his central message. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians he makes it very clear that the resurrection is not about atonement - God was not counting the sins of the world. He writes

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:16-20, NRSV)

One of the Good News Bible translates it, "Our message is that God was making all human beings his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends" (2 Corinthians 5:19). So reconciliation, friendship, right relations are what salvation is all about, not about some future date at the pearly gate.

So what does that have to do with us? In the last one hundred and fifty years or so the understanding of the death of Jesus as sacrificial atonement is making a comeback as the popular view. An unfortunate side effect is that Christianity has been reduced from any to a simple statement of belief in Jesus as the ticket into heaven. Belief, not behaviour, again has become the touchstone from any and too frequently used, especially by those who insist on a literalistic reading of the Bible, to exclude and even punish those who disagree or whom they see as being on the outside - even though Jesus made very obvious demonstrations of including those whom everyone else put on the outside. In action and in teaching Jesus included sinners, the sick, the blind, the lame, tax gatherers and so on.

Emphasis on sacrificial atonement instead of reconciliation has led to the exclusion of people with a homosexual orientation. They are viewed as being outside of God's grace and therefore kept out of churches and, in society, out of a place. Jobs, housing, marriage have been denied to underscore society's lack of acceptance. The United Church, along with a number of other churches and individuals, has been at the forefront of challenging this rejection as being against the spirit of reconciliation which was so much a part of Jesus' message and life.

Unfortunately the Government of Alberta still believes in sacrificial atonement. Needing an offering to their god, the Market Place, they have chosen transgendered people to be the sacrificial lamb, cutting off funding for gender reassignment surgery - a sad, pathetic choice that will hurt a tiny, powerless group to save a relatively insignificant amount of money.

In the Biblical Letter to the Ephesians, the emerging church at Ephesus we find these words on which some versions put the heading, "One in Christ." Please listen to them as if the two groups being written about were not Gentiles and Jews but the Christian churches and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual persons

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth . . . remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought nearby by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2: 11-22, NRSV).

So with due respect for some other Christians who understand Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection differently, Easter is not about an atoning sacrifice. Jesus is not the sacrificial lamb, provided by God to appease an angry God and prevent God from punishing us for all our sins. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as seeing his own impending death in this way, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:31-2)

Unity, my friends, is more than a town in Saskatchewan, more even than multiculturalism, as important as it is, certainly more than a united outrage against a petulant performer, as gratifying as that may be. The unity of the resurrection is more than Christianity or any other religion. The unity of the resurrection is God's passionate, aching longing for reconciliation, for a profound friendship with all aspects of creation, a deep calling for each of us to love one another and God's creation into fulfillment, God calling out to the divine in each of us, yearning to join in a cosmic **Alleluia!**

Christ is risen indeed.

Amen