

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Scarboro United Church

Calgary AB

J. Paul Mullen

Read Luke 3: 1-6

“Peace in Our Desolation”

Twenty years ago today a frustrated, suicidal man entered L’Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal and killed 14 women and injured 10 women and four men. He claimed he was fighting feminism. If anything, he strengthened feminism and gave it momentum.

The women killed were: Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault, Annie Turcotte, Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz.

A sad, sad commentary on how threatened some members of a dominant culture can be when major change becomes visible and its consequences felt, and how inept and inappropriate some responses can be.

The job of a dominant culture is to stay dominant. To do this it must keep change minimal and manageable, ensuring that those on top stay on top.

In Copenhagen this week the political leaders of the major countries of the world will meet in an effort to address climate change and to stay in power. Huge corporations have been strategizing and acting for years to sow the seeds of doubt about climate change so they can retain their wealth and power. Is it any wonder that those e-mails from the climate scientists which can easily be misinterpreted as casting doubt on climate change? Is it any wonder that they found their way into the news media just a week before the meeting in Copenhagen? Is it any wonder that cigarette manufacturers still pay scientists to cast doubt on the harmfulness of their golden goose? No ineptitude here, just very careful, deliberate undermining of a perceived threat to their power and wealth.

If you have any doubt about what is happening consider this. How many of you are aware of Kairos? If the name doesn’t ring a bell, Kairos is the interfaith social justice organization of the United Church and other mainline denominations. The most recent action of Kairos in Canada was a church leaders tour of the Alberta tar sands. Our own Bill Phipps was part of that delegation and recently reported to Calgary Presbytery. Their report is considered fair and balanced and raises serious questions and asks for action. For 35 years the organizations which make up Kairos have been receiving matching grants from CIDA, the Canadian International Development agency. This week those grants, for their next four years work, were denied. Kairos, already trying to do the impossible with meagre resources, has lost one half of its funding. Have you read or seen or heard any reports in the news media? There have been articles but certainly not front page with big headlines. The only reason given by Minister of International Cooperation, Bev Oda, is that Kairos no longer fits with CIDA’s priorities, even though CIDA itself has consistently given Kairos excellent evaluations for its work and approved the budget.

Why did the Harper government choose this week, a week when socially conscious and justice-seeking people are focussed on achieving environmental justice, a week when the Prime Minister is getting huge press coverage on the world stage? Why did the Harper government choose this week to deny funding to Kairos? This is political manipulation and arrogance at its worst and the kind of actions oppressive governments take against perceived enemies. Kairos has an excellent international reputation and record for addressing human rights issues. What kind of record does China have?

Strangely enough this all relates to John the Baptist! Just over 2000 years ago John the Baptist was born. It was about the same time that Herod Antipas became the Tetrarch or Ruler of Galilee and Perea, about one quarter of what is now Israel. John grew up to be a one-man thorn in the side of Herod. As a young man, though, John withdrew into the wilderness. He was, I believe, deeply unhappy with the violent oppression of his people by the Romans and by his leaders becoming willing clients of Rome.

When John comes out of the wilderness, the place of desolation and new vision, he begins his mission and begins to irritate Herod. First he calls on the Jewish people to repent and become Jewish! This is why he was calling them down to the Jordan River to get baptized. Baptism, at that time, is part of the ceremony for a non-Jew to become a Jew. John is openly critical of Herod for violating Jewish marriage Law. Herod had divorced his wife and married his half-brother's wife, Herodias, after she got a divorce from her husband. Herod responded by having John beheaded. That's the extreme way to end someone's funding!

John is primarily a messenger of peace. His movement is non-violent. Had he been encouraging violence, not only he, but all of his followers would have been executed. The fact that he dies alone indicates that he has not been fomenting armed revolt. At the same time those who hear him will be looking for the leader who will be the one to follow John and lead the revolution.

What John is doing has more to do with bringing peace by challenging the legitimacy of the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, as well as accusing people of becoming too Romanized, even honouring false Roman gods and the Roman Emperor as son of the god, Julius. Hence their need to repent and be washed clean of their old beliefs and behaviours. John is doing this because he believes that God is about to set everything right by turning everything upside down.

John believes in what Dominic Crossan calls "The Great Divine Clean-up". He believes that God will bring justice and peace to the defeated and the oppressed by bringing a violent end to all those who use violence and power to dominate society. He believes that God will bring peace through violence.

When John is executed, his cousin, Jesus, picks up his ministry. Jesus' message is similar but different. Instead of preaching a violent "Divine Clean-up", Jesus preaches a different kind of kingdom, a peaceable kingdom, a collaborative kingdom between human and divine, between us and God. As Crossan describes it "The Great Divine Cleanup" is an interactive process with a present beginning in time and a future (short or long?) consummation. Would it happen without God? No. Would it happen without believers? No. "To see the presence of the Kingdom of God, said Jesus, "come, see how we live, and then live likewise." (Crossan, John Dominic, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, Harper Collins, 2007, p. 116)

Jesus is not just preaching to the good folks 2000 years ago. He preaches to you and to me, come, see how we live, then live likewise. This is Jesus' plan for peace and there is no plan B. Being a part of the peaceable kingdom or kin-dom is simple but not easy. We are called to live in community with deep respect for one another; loving God and God's creation and one another into fulfilment; finding our peace and security in community and through trust in an eternal right relationship with the unity of the cosmos; seeking peace through justice and resisting evil.

It begins in our homes when we become more respectful and less defensive. It begins in our workplaces when we forgo the blaming game we use to protect our reputations and justify our actions. Fault-finding and blaming lead directly to verbal and economic violence against those we blame. Physical violence soon follows, then we pick up weapons to rid ourselves of those we identify as “the problem”. There are non-blaming, non-defensive ways of speaking and relating. People are not problems to solve but human beings in relationship and longing for right relations.

John the Baptist had it partly right. A great clean up is needed. Jesus got the rest right. That clean up starts when we opt into a non-violent community living with dignity and respect for all. It starts when we raise our voices to protest the violence of society. It starts when we write to the government and media about the damage done to organizations like Kairos. (There is information on the table at the back on how to do that) It starts when we speak out against the doubt and fear mongering of corporate empires. It starts when we take the risk of examining our own lives and our life together in church and community to see where we contribute to oppression and violence. It starts when we turn away from the way of greed and death and enter in to the flow of love and life. It starts when we stop treating people as objects to be manipulated or done away with and offer relationships of shalom - God’s peace with justice, healing and wholeness.

This is the message of John the Baptist to us today. Come on down to the river of life. Come on down to the holy water. Come on down and come on in. Don't just test the water with your toes, come on in over your head. Come on down and rise up to new life, new hope, new peace. Submerge yourself in the flowing love of God and become that love for a world in need of love and peace. Come on down and come on up to a new creation, new birth, new life. Come on down and let the love of God flow into the stable of your heart and be born anew into the squalor and desolation, desolation that you know too well. Desolate and tired of being desolate.

Come on down, come on down, come on down. Shalom – God’s peace through justice and healing awaits.

“And the whole human race will know God’s Shalom.” (Luke 3: 6, adapted)

Amen