

Healing Every Sickness

Matt. 9:35-10:1

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We have been learning a lot through the COVID-19 pandemic – like how to bake bread and cut our own hair. We have been learning how to travel less and how to wait patiently in line.

The church has also been developing new skills. Like discovering new ways of participating in corporate worship. Today is another example of that. We have been learning how to have community through technology.

For many years I have been studying the changing place of the church in society, as I am sure many of you have been as well. We have experienced a decline in the value that society places in the church. The resulting absence of most youth and young adults in our congregations has become an accepted reality. Various writers have suggested that people have not abandoned spirituality, they have merely discarded the need to practice that spirituality through formal corporate worship.

Ever since my time as the Executive Director of Mennonite Church Canada I have been trying to be a student of how a younger demographic portrays the church, or experiences the church. And since beginning my term with Citizens for Public Justice, this experiential learning has given me additional understandings. I do not claim to be able to represent all youth and young adults. But I simply want to share various experiences that I think provide a possible window, shedding some light on the topic.

Wood Green Mennonite Church, London, UK – young adult and call to worship

- Don't like being forced to say the same thing:
- Isn't the task of the church to ask provocative questions
 - o Not looking for answers but provocative questions

Church in southwestern Ontario

- We don't all agree on things, in fact we are not trying to agree. Instead this is a place we can come with questions and engage a debate. Debate is my worship – contrasted to not carrying what faith says

HolyRood Mennonite church, Calgary, AB – why can't they just march for peace

- The church does not have the market on addressing issues of social justice

Young woman – I don't march because I am angry, I march because I love God and God's creation. The student climate march in Ottawa – the throng of youth.

Film festival in Vancouver – weepy daughter of a pastor – want the church! Broadview**

Breadth of young people participating in the Black Lives Matter protests, and prior to that the Idle No More movement.

These encounters continue to percolate in my mind. They feel like some sort of social commentary on the church. It is within this context that I look at the Matthew passage differently this morning.

Jesus ministry occurred at a time in Palestine when several large farms restricted the livelihood of ordinary peasants. In addition, farmers also suffered from heavy taxation.

http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/_merenlah/oppimateriaalit/text/english/land.htm

However, most people in the time of Jesus produced food, clothing, or both but could afford few luxuries. They earned enough to support their families, pay their taxes, and offer sacrifices during one or more annual festivals.

There were of course, landless people. But King Herod was careful to organize large public works projects that employed thousands of men. As a result, desperate poverty was present but never reached a socially dangerous level. The puppet rulers of Palestine had clear expectations given by Rome: to keep the territory calm, peaceful and loyal.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/The-context-of-Jesus-career>

The Roman Empire grew over a long period of time, emerging from a political unit in Italy to the entire Mediterranean basin. This expansion certainly included invasion and conquest. But it also included more subtle takeover.

Historical records provide evidence of Roman venture capitalists moving to the fringes of the Roman economic sphere. They would establish small economic empires that grew into significant social forces. These then would serve as networks by which Roman political power followed.

Although Judea was governed by a semi-independent king (Herod the Great), it was Rome that held the true power. So, for the ordinary people of the region, Rome was a sort of dominant political factor. Although folks may not see Romans on a day-to-day basis, the imposition of Roman power was certainly there. The political reality of the day was of a dominant power overseeing the life on a day-to-day basis.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/jews.html>.

It is no surprise then that Israel's messianic hope became increasingly influenced by this context. Against the backdrop of the bondage and affliction of a foreign power, people began looking for a political Messiah who would deliver them from the yoke of Rome and re-

establish Davidic monarchy rule. Hope for change was within political power and economic freedom.

This is the context of our Scripture passage this morning. This is the context in which Jesus sends out his disciples, giving them authority to cast out unclean spirits and cure **every** disease and sickness (10:1).

I am curious about the reaction of Jesus to the crowds insistent on following him. In verse 36 it says that Jesus felt compassion for the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Compassion was not elicited because the crowds were filled with disease. Compassion did not seem to be prompted by the overwhelming number of people possessed by unclean spirits. Compassion was triggered because people needed a leader. They were misled; misguided.

I wonder if Jesus would have the same response to our current context.

Our societies have been tormented by materialism, numbing us into a false sense of well-being. When in fact, as Wilkinson & Pickett point out in their recent book, *The Inner Level*, materialism has created structures of inequality that leave rich and poor alike facing chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and addiction. The poor are harassed by never measuring up, and the rich are hounded by needing to stay ahead. As Wilkinson & Pickett state; "Given that economic growth has brought us unprecedented luxury and comfort, it seems paradoxical that levels of anxiety have tended to increase rather than decrease over time" (pg. 17). Economic growth has not made societies healthier it has created larger gaps between the rich and poor and made society unhealthier.

The compassion of Jesus reacting to a people needing leadership was to send out the disciples to cast out unclean spirits and heal every disease and illness. I am left to wonder if we might do well to broaden our understanding of unclean spirits and illness.

While not denying the exorcism and physical healing power of Jesus, it is clear that his vision of wholeness and health was much broader. The treatment of Samaritans; his rejection of gender restrictions, the embrace of the poor and disadvantaged; these are actions of healing of **every** disease and illness. I think this is what was included by Jesus in the mandate of healing and wholeness given to the disciples.

I think this is also the mandate given to the church today. Ours is not a call to protect the ability to worship, as much as it is a call to worship by protecting the vulnerable. We are not sent to defend capitalist economies, but to resist injustice and stand in solidarity with economic victims. We are to help dismantle systemic barriers that determine opportunity by race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Our society does need healing, and the church is sent to be a source of that healing.

I think this is the opportunity now facing the church. Canadian society has two clear expectations of the church:

1. That the church gets along
2. That the church should be a leader in addressing issues of poverty and social injustice

i.e Justice Tour, 2015 - Vancouver, BC – young woman, I have not seen the church in my lifetime stand up for anything

At CPJ, we seek to empower the healing activity of the church by providing a platform for political policy reform. As a progressive faith-based organization, CPJ recognizes that responding to issues of social injustice is a natural response of people of faith. As followers of a Compassionate God, we understand that the image of God within us yearns to be expressed through us. So, remaining disconnected from areas of need is contrary to the impulse of God within us. Ignoring injustice frustrates the urge of God's compassion within us. As people of faith our ultimate sense of fulfillment and satisfaction is found in cooperating with God's passion to restore.

CPJ's principled approach to public policy is captured in the concept of public justice.

Public justice is the political dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation, and achieving the common good. This is particularly the responsibility of government and citizens. It involves seeking out and implementing just policies that allow everyone to live in dignity and participate in society.

Rooted in Scripture, public justice unfolds in human history as God continues with redemptive work in creation. It provides norms for decision-making, not a recipe book for good government, a formula for a just society, or a list of isolated moral issues for Christians to address.

Public justice offers a coherent approach to social issues, but respects the complexity of creation and contemporary life, rather than flattening public life to its economic dimension alone or to a majority opinion.

Our work focuses on encouraging public policy that will eradicate poverty in Canada, provide a just transition towards establishing ecological justice, and assure the protection of refugee rights. We understand this as loving our neighbour as ourselves. This will make a stronger Canada; a place where all creation can flourish as God intended.

I invite you to join your voice in the cause. CPJ focuses on those elected officials creating policies. We advocate for a just approach that creates a society where all can flourish and

grow. But our focus is also on those electing those who produce the policies. Through engagement, education and awareness, we seek to influence the Canadian culture so that it demands just policies; a citizenry in which no one seeking election would think of promoting anything but justice because that's what people demand.

I invite you to consider becoming a member of CPJ. Any annual financial donation entitles you to membership privileges – and even more importantly registers you with these advocacy concerns. As an advocacy, lobby charity, it is important that we can show MP's that there is a growing number of Canadians registering themselves with these concerns. The financial contribution also provides us with the ability to impress MP's that these are more than signatures on a petition. These are individuals who are serious about these concerns.

Join us in these efforts. Because we believe, as people of faith, working for justice is a natural expression of worship for a God of justice. For the love of Canada. For the love of neighbour. For the love of God.

Wilkinson, Richard & Pickett, Kate. 2020. *The Inner Level: How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone's well-being.* Penguin Books.