

John Docherty, January 3, 2016

Freedom Bound : The path of inclusion

It turns out the Advent material from the Leader magazine included Epiphany Sunday in its programme. I guess I should have looked at the material a little more carefully before treating the Sunday before Christmas as the wrap-up of the series.

So, in fact, this Sunday is the intended final instalment of the “Freedom Bound” theme – “Freedom Bound : On the path of inclusion”.

The focus statement from the material says this :

“The light Jesus brings into the world challenges and illuminates all the distinctions between us that we elevate as ultimate goods. For if the light has the power to draw wise men from afar and overcome barriers of former religious outcasts, what power does it still have to bring new freedom into our church and the world?”

The section that is included with the material that is intended to provide some inspiration for the meditation for today, continues this idea and makes this statement :

“Like a pebble thrown into a pool of water, the effects of Christ's birth and message ripple out. The freedom that Christ brings extends its reach into ever-widening circles through the church's message of inclusive love.”

I like this image of a 'ripple effect' insofar as it conjures up a picture of gentle, undulating influences that subtly change the surrounding environment. Ripples are not violent, earth-shattering natural phenomena like earthquakes or hurricanes; catastrophes in the making. They are quiet, unobtrusive waves that simply make their presence felt and move on. They are not tsunamis that tear away and destroy.

It's just a metaphor, of course, and can easily be seen to be faulty.

In some circles, for example, the message of Christ would more readily be presented as a tsunami, rather than a ripple. It would be promoted as a radically transforming eruption of God's power in a world become complacent and sinful; an earth-shaking quake of level 10 magnitude in the process of reducing what is, in order to replace it with what is to be.

I think it's fair to say that we Mennonites would more typically think of Christ's message in the more radical sense.

I think we *do* think of the message of peace and forgiveness as an earthquake-generated

tsunami that will ultimately remove all traces of the egocentric / ethnocentric / elite-centric / race-centric / ...whatever-centric power structures that currently dominate life in our societies.

Naturally, as good Mennonites, we lean towards merging these two images of ripple and tsunami into a 'tsunami-ripple' : a gently undulating presence that will ultimately and radically transform the world into something new. The persistent, quiet lapping of the ripples against the shore that doesn't overwhelm and create havoc like a full tsunami, but a ripple-tsunami that eventually erodes away resistance and creates a new shoreline.

And, as the “sermon starter” thought would suggest, we would see this shore-eroding message as a message of inclusive love.

And yet ... this rose-coloured lens of inclusive love through which we prefer to see the church in the world is not without its own problems.

It's probably fair to allow that the message of the church (not to equate this message with the message of Christ) has almost always been one of inclusion of a particular sort. The church has almost always seen its mandate as a call to bring in all nations under one religious roof, and that roof is “our” roof.

We have almost always wanted to be inclusive by bringing everyone into our circle.

But the circle has always remained “ours”, and unless you chose (or were forced) to join the circle you remained excluded.

As newcomers have joined the circle, they have become one of “us”, and “our” circle has now simply “included” a few more souls.

Those who remained outside “our” circle, could never be included unless they became one of “us” in some way.

Even when we allowed others into our circle, we were quite clear that there were usually conditions attached to this acceptance :

- you have to think like us (you have to accept our confession of faith);
- you have to behave like us (you have to adopt our forms of worship, and embrace our traditions)
- you have to sound like us (you have to express your faith using our language patterns – for example, you have to pepper your speech with “Praise the Lord!”s – or not)
- ideally, you have to even look like us (you have to dress modestly, you shouldn't wear ostentatious jewellery or clothing, you might be expected to wear a broad-

brimmed hat or a prayer bonnet)

Of course, those patterns of inclusion / exclusion aren't unique to Christianity, and some of the criteria for inclusion aren't inherently wrong simply because they exclude some.

Every defined group needs some way of determining who is in and who is not.

You aren't a member of the College of Physicians just because you once cleaned a wound and it healed without a scar.

You aren't a member of the Order of Engineers just because you can nail two pieces of wood together.

You aren't a Muslim just because you speak Arabic.

You aren't a Jew just because you like bagels and cream cheese.

You aren't a Sikh just because you have a beard.

You aren't a Hindu just because you're a vegetarian.

You aren't a Buddhist just because you once felt compassion towards someone.

And you aren't a Christian just because you know the Bible stories about Noah, Moses and Jesus.

All of the above exclusionary groups have legitimate grounds for setting their respective boundaries and theoretically anyone can become a member if you meet the criteria. You either are, or you are not, a member of the group.

And, generally speaking, for the non-religious groups at least, non-membership is not, in and of itself, a moral judgment on those who are not members. You are not a bad person or lacking some fundamental human quality just because you are not a member of the College of Physicians or just because you are not a member of the Order of Engineers.

You might well be a bad person, and you might well lack some fundamental human quality, but it's not a reflection of your lack of membership in either of those bodies.

But when it comes to inclusion or exclusion by a religious group, there usually *is* a moral component to the perception of the kind of person you are, or, at the very least, a presumption of some kind of consequence for your remaining outside the fold.

And that, I think, is where the challenge rests with us as we seek to be inclusive in our love. Because, if, as Christians, or worse, if, as Mennonites, we believe that we really

are the group to which everyone must belong, then I fear we may be missing the point somewhat.

Let me explain.

Maybe, on this Epiphany Sunday, we need to view these Magi, these wise men from the East, as reminders that the love of God is already inclusive; that God was quite prepared to “speak” to these non-Jews in a language that they understood – the language of the stars – even though they were “outside” the fold. Yes, it's true that they were brought to Bethlehem to pay homage to the child who was to be the Messiah, but it is also true that “... being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country ...”. We never hear of them again, and have no reason to believe that they ever entered the Jewish fold.

Maybe we need to remember that we have a number of Scriptural passages that suggest that God is quite ready to embrace those who seek to draw near, whether we get in the way or not :

Deuteronomy 4:29 NRSV “... you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.”

Jeremiah 29:13 NRSV “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart ...”

James 4:8 NRSV “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

Some years ago, Mennonite Church Canada held its annual gathering on the west coast. As a sign of respect to our indigenous neighbours, and as a symbol of our desire to be inclusive, we adopted the inukshuk as the visual representation of that openness.

When we held a worship service here at MFM after the conference, and the use of the inukshuk was described to us, I remember feeling uneasy that the inukshuk had been appropriated in this way.

I recognized that it had been adopted in good faith as a genuine expression of our desire as Mennonites to recognize that we were on indigenous territory, and in need of a gesture of respect. But something about it didn't feel quite right.

I remember commenting during sharing time that it felt a little bit like a house invader taking over the family home, evicting the occupants, but keeping the family pictures on the wall as a cute memento of the family whose home we had stolen.

Rather than using the inukshuk as a symbol of our willingness to include our native peoples in *our* lives, people whose land we had taken, I suggested that maybe we could

use the inukshuk as a reminder to live our lives in ways that would make others want to include us in *their* lives;

Maybe, as we are “Freedom bound, on the path of inclusion”, we need to flip our assumptions about inclusion on their heads.

Instead of seeking to be inclusive of others, maybe we need to seek to be included – not in the sense of being absorbed by the trends of the day, or caught up in unhealthy lifestyles, or trying to be all things to all persons – but seeking to be included as valued parts of the lives of those with whom we share a common humanity.

Maybe, as we are “Freedom bound, on the path of inclusion”, we need to anticipate that freedom by recognizing that we are all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, already covered by that inclusive love of God; that the in-group that matters is not MFM, or the churches of MCEC, or the churches of Mennonite World Conference, or even the collection of churches that make up the whole of Christianity, but the community of all people of faith who are earnestly seeking after God, and to whom God says “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart”.