

RIGHT RELATIONS

March 4, 2018

Lent 3

[Exodus 20:1-17](#)

[John 2:13-22](#)

(prayer)

Early Christianity was already at least 60 years old when the first copies of the gospel of John began to circulate. Biblical scholars speculate that the fourth gospel began to inform the Christian story late in the first century (in the 90s, at the earliest).

By this time, the other gospels (Mark, Luke and Matthew) and many of the letters of Paul and others were increasingly well known throughout various christian communities.

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During the 50s, when the apostle Paul was actively promoting faith in Jesus, one of the growing pains of the early Christianity was how to incorporate increasing numbers of gentile believers into a faith movement that began as a new sect of Judaism.

Paul addressed this issue many times as Jews and Gentiles worshipped together in many of the early church communities with whom he communicated.

A purpose of some of his letters to these outlying churches was to garner financial support for the *Saints in Jerusalem* - lead by some of Jesus' original followers like James and Peter. The Jerusalem Christian Community was **not** made up of who had converted from Judaism to Christianity.

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Jesus did not start a new religion.

He was a hebrew rabbi, whose primary audience was other hebrews living in Judea and galilee.

The earliest followers of Jesus remained active and faithful Jews whose traditional faith was enhanced (not replaced) by the mission and ministry of rabbi Jesus of Nazareth.

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Although the precise [history](#) is fuzzy, in the years that followed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE, it became increasingly difficult for Jewish followers of Jesus to remain active in the synagogues as the rabbinic movement (rising from pharassaic roots) began to consolidate authority among the various Jewish sects.

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I mention this because, by the time the gospel of John was written in the late first century, the reality was that there was no longer much of a connection between the emerging christian movement and its Judean roots.

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Although, during Jesus' ministry of the 30s, virtually all of the disciples were faithful and active Jews, when the fourth gospel shares its narratives about the time of Jesus, it uses language reflecting the realities of the 90s.

You may have noticed that, in the passage we heard from John chapter two this morning, that it reads like the "jews" were a seperate group from Jesus... which of course they weren't.

Now, Jesus, a small town pharassaic rabbi from the rural north *did have* conflicts and concerns with some of the practices of the big city temple elites and the saduccean priestly class (as we heard today), but... they all remained under the umbrella of "jews".

The fairest way to understand the reality of Jesus' world, when you read "the jews" in the gospel of John, is to hear that as referring to "the temple authorities" rather than all hebrew people.

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Sadly, language influenced by shifting realities of the late first century, has been used in divisive anti-semitic ways in the centuries since.

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If you have been following the internal (navel-gazing) news of the United Church of Canada over the last couple of years, you may know that “we” are on the verge of significant structural changes as a denomination. When the General Council last met in 2015, it approved moving from a four-level structure (pastoral charge, presbytery, conference and general council) to a three-level governance model (communities of faith, regions and denominational council). It also approved changes to how the wider church will fund its mission and administrative work. As well, it approved amalgamating the three different streams of ministry (diaconal, designated lay and ordained) under a single *Order of Ministry* designation.

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Eight of the changes proposed by the 42nd General Council were so significant, that before they could be implemented, they had to be supported by referenda (aka *remits*) sent out to the presbyteries... and (in five of the eight cases) to pastoral charges as well. The way the UCCan polity works, only if a remit is approved, can the 43rd General Council (meeting this coming July) begin to implement the changes approved by GC42.

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The [results](#) of the eight remits are now known. Seven were approved (each with large majorities). One was not... and it wasn't close.

[Remit #6](#) got only 33% support from pastoral charges and 30% of presbyteries. FYI, on your behalf, St. David's Council voted no; Yellowhead Presbytery voted yes - although it was only a one vote margin (in fact, at first, it looked like a tie, but that's a complicated story).

Water under the bridge.

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Personally, I liked remit 6. I abstained in SD's vote, but voted “yes” at YHP.

This is not the first time I have found myself among the minority opinion.

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The reality is that the United Church of Canada is not ready to have only *One Order of Ministry*. Although the vast majority of UCCan clergy do the exact same kind of work (and the average person in the pew doesn't see or understand the difference), the church will continue to have ministers trained and recognized separately as Ordained, Diaconal, and Designated Lay Ministers... and DLMS will continue to get paid less than their DM and OM colleagues.

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This result did not surprise me; we (ministers) are kind of protective of our unique turfs.

As this remit was formally and informally debated, I heard friends from all three off the current streams of ministry who had misgivings of sharing a common identity with each other.

In fairness, some of us will claim that the education and training of *our* particular stream is superior to one or both the others and we don't want to lose our uniqueness, even if most people in our churches don't understand how *special* we are. ;)

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Even so, at times like this, the words of [Rodney King](#) come to my mind: “Can we all get along?”

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At a most basic level, the ten commandments read like the foundation of a societal legal code - a list of *dos* and *don'ts* (mostly don'ts) to follow.

But at their heart, they are instructions for harmonious living ... follow these standards and there will be a peaceful balance in our relationships with each other, with God and with all creation.

The ten commandments make it harder for someone to abuse the power they might have over someone else based on their gender, their age, their employment or social status, their physical strength, their wealth, etc.

In a way, the ten commandments are a means of equity.

Even slaves and indentured servants were guaranteed one day off per week (the same day off their masters' got), under the guise of keeping the sabbath day holy.

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Jesus [summed up](#) volumes of Hebrew law with three memorable calls to harmony and love: "Love God with your heart, soul and might, and love your neighbour as yourself: on these rest all of the commandments".

In fact, as a start, you can make yourself a three column chart where you associate each of the ten commandments with whether they encourage a love of God, a love of others and/or a love of self.

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I believe that we are living in a time of a global rethinking of our identity.

On one hand, we are more knowledgeable of the mosaic diversity (and essential unity) within the human family than ever before.

On the other hand, we are encouraged to retreat within the uniqueness of our particular "tribe".

What is my heritage? What is *my* culture?

Nothing highlights this more for me than all of the personal DNA testing commercials you see now-a-days. Have you seen the one: where the guy (with the obvious north american accent) says that he grew up thinking he was German, until he had his DNA tested and learned that 52% of his DNA comes from Scotland and Ireland?

["So, I traded in my lederhosen for a kilt."](#)

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The lure to discover *where we are from* is a direct consequence of the history of colonialism. Even those of us who can trace many generations of family history to a particular place are still assumed to be from somewhere else.

This is particularly true in North and South America, New Zealand and Australia, where the initial waves of European colonists became the dominant residents of these places after they were "*discovered*".

In Asia and Africa, there was less European migration and settlement, but the history aggressive colonial domination of the natural resources and the exploitation (even enslavement) of the people already living there has created movements where indigenous people from all over the world are trying to re-claim their unique pre-colonial culture.

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Two North American examples illustrate this.

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1. Look at the response to the latest Marvel movie, [Black Panther](#). As a facebook friend of mine noted the other day: “[It] was not simply a good movie, it was an important movie!” A lot of people, particularly African Americans, are excited about a story that imagines an African nation that was not affected by colonialism. Wakanda’s people and resources were not abused by greedy foreigners. The Wakandans are fully independent: intellectually, culturally, technologically, morally and ethically.
2. In Canada, Indigenous and Métis people are recovering language, culture and spirituality that was systematically suppressed over the last two centuries. The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) reminds *those of us (in Canada) of immigrant heritage* that we can not avoid the impact and responsibilities that rise out of the colonial treatment of this land’s indigenous people and their descendents.

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For most of human history, we have wanted to believe that *all that defines us* could be found within a day’s walk of where we live.

As our species ventured further from these homes, we have learned that we are part of a much bigger and more diverse world.

This both excited us and frightened us.

In the best of our early history, we blended cultures and created new harmonious communities.

In the worst of our imperialistic aspirations, we oppressed and suppressed parts of the wider human story: justified by delusions of grandeur and attitudes of cultural superiority.

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It does us no good for us to deny or hide from this history.

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The truth is... we are... where we are: brought here (to this moment in time) by a knowledge and a history that fills us with both pride and shame.

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The truth is that - even the most enlightened among us has to admit that...

We are not free of our colonial heritage.

We have not evolved beyond our stubborn tribalism.

We misuse the word “proud” to build ourselves up - over and above others.

A pet peeve of mine: We claim *pride* in parts of ourselves that we had no choice in creating (that are simply byproducts of our birth): the colour of our skin, the place we were born, the combination of our X and Y chromosomes, our particular hardwired orientation for romantic attraction, the social status and privileges of our parents.

I do understand that for certain identifiable minority communities - who have been told that the should be *ashamed* of those aspects of themselves they were born with - that the use of the word “*pride*” is part of a reclaiming of their god-given equality within the human family.

This is part of the long process of moving away from our colonial past.

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Until that journey is complete, we have to admit that...

We are still motivated by selfish isolationism and a fear of the other.

We continue to grasp for whatever strands of identity that makes us stand out in a big world that is

getting smaller every day.

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One of the authors that I read during my sabbatical last fall, William Bridges, wrote: *We resist transition not because we can't accept the change, but because we can't accept letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.*

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I believe that our best future will be founded in our shared humanity rather than our divisive sub-identities.

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Using William Bridges' language: The situation has already changed; we simply have not fully come to terms with increasingly irrelevant aspects of our old identity.

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I am hopeful that - as time goes by - more and more of our efforts will go into building bridges rather than walls.

In the modern world, with each new generation, we are increasingly, deeply aware of our connection to everyone else who shares this earth.

Learning how to live well together is a necessity of our age if we want our species to know new eras.

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A wonderful thing is that I don't think that this will require *new* thinking. The words are already part of our tradition: "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Lev19:18)

And it is cross-cultural.

Almost every philosophical and theological expression contains some form of this [golden rule](#) as a central norm.

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Moving into the post-colonial era of human history (where we honestly live in ***right relations*** with each other) does not require new thinking. It simply requires some time and commitment.

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Let us pray:

Help us live out your grace, O God. May we experience the wonder of your presence in each person we meet. Amen.

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