

Sermon 20200705 Proper 14 – The Reverend Gail Newell

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

We just sang that wonderful hymn about the winds of God which hold us and propel us. Do you remember standing at the front of a ferry and leaning into the wind? When it is really strong it holds us up!

Abraham had experience of God holding him up. With Sarah he went into a strange land at God's request and now he is wealthy beyond anything he expected. Sarah has died of old age and he's very old too. He wants to see his son well settled into marriage but not to a local woman.

Abraham decides Isaac needs a bride from the land that he came from. But he is too old to go. He doesn't want Isaac to go either. What would God think if Isaac left this land that God has given them?

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So Abraham calls his most trusted servant to him and gives him the charge to find a bride for Isaac. It is a big responsibility. The servant wonders how can he choose someone suitable for Isaac?

The servant decides to let God choose. He'll go to the well outside the city Abraham is from and wait there with the camels. When the women come out to get water he'll ask for some. The woman kind enough to draw water for him and the camels will be the right person for Isaac.

This trust in God to send the right woman is rewarded for indeed Rebekah comes out and gives the servant and the camels water. It takes a long time to fill a trough with only a pitcher so the servant has enough time to consider Rebecca and decide she is the right person.

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To be kind is to be generous, caring and loving. These are qualities that we attribute to God. It is a beautiful part of this story of the origins of the Hebrews that their ancestor was kind to travellers and animals.

The Abraham story is also an amazing example of God's tolerance of our shortcomings. Abraham was brought to this new land, settled in it and had good relations with his neighbours yet wouldn't think of marrying his son to one of them.

Before knowing all Caananite women Abraham pre-judged them as unsuitable for Isaac. Prejudice is a pre-judgment about another person because of their race, religion or ethnic background before knowing them as individuals.

Prejudice becomes racism when power is added into the mix. Abraham had the power to send for a bride from his homeland. No Caananite woman was even given the chance to apply for the position.

This kind of implicit racism has run through our societies from before historical time.

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We know from the story of Hagar after Abraham threw her out to the desert that God does not want people mistreated no matter their origin or position in society. God constantly shows favour to the ones on the bottom of the social ladder. The bible is full of counsel to help widows, orphans and strangers. God loves all peoples.

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Racism separates us. It can sometimes be hard to see our own role in it. Abraham saw nothing wrong in his plan to get Isaac a bride from his homeland.

Living in this world we do have to make choices. We want the best for ourselves and our families. We choose to accumulate property and goods to keep our families well and safe in troubled times. The world around us promotes accumulation rather than sharing. The world justifies one person or group having more than another by valuing one group and marginalizing another.

Katharine Von Kellenbach describes three main techniques of marginalization.

First, others are described as inferior. When European settlers arrived in North America the native people were described as inferior because their way of life was different from the settlers. They had no permanent homes. By describing their way as backward it allowed their land to be settled by people who had so called better ways of life.

Second, others are called sinful or evil. Women were called inherently sinful because of Eve – it justified not treating women as anything more than property. Equating light with good and dark with evil has been used to call people of colour inherently bad.

People of different religions or even of differing opinions within the same religion are called sinful or evil for their views. Power struggles between countries and peoples often use religion as justification for oppression.

Third, others are made invisible or their role or contributions are downplayed.

Native peoples were put away on reservations and their roles in helping European settle in North America have been insufficiently recognized. People of colour made a huge contribution to the economy of the southern US but as 'property' were no more recognized than a tractor. Chinese immigrants who built the railway have had little recognition for their contributions.

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As much as I abhor the violence that has erupted in the wake of racist killings it is good that we are now looking at the problem of systemic racism.

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It is a problem because like Abraham we are often not even conscious of biases we hold.

When Mahatma Gandhi first started working for justice for East Indians he didn't realize that he held racist attitudes about the Black Africans he lived among. By the time he left Africa for India he had changed his views.

If even someone as amazing as Gandhi can have racist views is there any way out of this mess?

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Recent news has been distressing. On top of the murders committed by police have been horrible stories of the treatment of indigenous people in our hospitals. One woman who was suffering a stroke was assumed to be drunk even when she had no history of substance abuse. Can we even hope to turn this huge problem around?

This morning Jesus answers with a resounding "YES!".

"Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

When we feel overwhelmed, Jesus will refresh us, will hold us up, and fill us so we can carry on.

When, as Paul said this morning, "I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate", Jesus says "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me".

A yoke is meant for two. Jesus walks beside us. Jesus teaches us so that we can see what needs to be done. It is God's intent that we do not carry the load ourselves but that we participate in the mission to bring justice to and respect the dignity of all people of the world.

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Von Kellenbach gives us a good place to start.

First, we don't accept or use statements that a group of people are inferior or sinful because of their race or ethnic background. It is not an impossible task to change what is acceptable in our culture. History shows we can make positive changes. Women are no longer treated as second class citizens. We have stopped telling hurtful Newfie jokes that were all the rage not that long ago.

Second, we start seeing the invisible. I grew up in the Sunday School, not the church. Do you remember, when children if they had to be seen in church at all were certainly not to be heard? Now we enjoy having them with us.

Indigenous people were put on reservations out of sight. What happened in residential schools was swept under the carpet. But we are making an effort to see them, their problems and their strengths.

Third, instead of wringing our hands and saying "Oh dear". We can support initiatives like the Urban Aboriginal Ministry through Care + Share. UAM strives to give dispossessed indigenous people dignity and a new sense that God loves them.

We can educate ourselves to uphold just and respectful practices through our Diocesan Dismantling Racism workshops when they resume.

We can support government initiatives to identify systemic racism. Write your MLA. Tell them this is a good thing and action should be taken on the concerns raised by the think tank report.

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Finally, we can be assured that God is with us in these times helping us learn, supporting a change our ways and loving us deeply into new life.

Let us pray,

Loving God, help us put on Jesus' yoke and learn to listen to and value each person as Your child. Blow the Holy Spirit into us with courage and strength to shoulder our part in dismantling barriers between people, that we may see and respect the dignity of every human being.

AMEN