

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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In our scripture this morning Jesus is quoted as saying that Prophets are not recognized in their hometown or among relatives. A couple of years ago I forced to carefully had reflect on this particular passage. Not because I was preaching on it, but at that time I was considering changing churches, and I was shoulder tapped and asked to consider pastoring my home congregation.

The thought of pastoring folk frightened me. Not because they're bad people, not because they're a difficult church, not that we wouldn't be a good fit, but more because in some ways it was because they knew me, or at least who I was. These were folk who would have seen me as an infant, and who may very well have changed my diapers; who would have seen me grow up through Sunday School; these are folk who would have seen me test out my first preaching muscles; and the thought of trying to pastor them terrified me.

I reflect on this today, reminding myself that in the almost fifteen years since I've worshipped there I've grown and changed. I think about some of the things I said then, and I'm pretty sure I would not say those things today. As I think back and I get waves of embarrassment and I cringe as I think about the false confidence I had then. I am not the person who left there to pursue seminary studies. The things I've studied, the people I've come to know, the life experiences I've had, have all shaped and changed me. And, in all fairness, they too have grown and changed in the last fifteen years too. I cannot assume they are the same congregation as when I left. They've had some defining events happen in the last decade and a half too, significant deaths, significant conversations and challenges, other pastors and visions. They aren't the church that I knew either.

As I think back and remember, the good times and the things that I may feel pangs of embarrassment over, I'm remained that the past, mine and my home congregations, is our past. What's happened, has happened, and we can't change that. We have to recognize that we aren't today, who we were then. Hardly anyone is for that matter. And if we can do that, look at our past, and notice those moments where things didn't go so well, moments that we'd like to change, and learn from those moments, so that we don't repeat we mistakes of the past. Than I'd say we're on the path to growth. Poet Maya Angelou once wrote about history, staying that it "cannot be un-lived, but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again."¹

I've been thinking about these things this week as I pondered Jesus' experience of coming back to Nazareth. Already in the 6th chapter of the gospel of Mark, so much has happened in Jesus' ministry. He has been baptized, tempted in the desert, called disciples, healed, taught, caused a little stir with some Pharisees, healed some more, taught some more, exorcised

¹ Maya Angelou, "On the Pulse of Morning," 1993.

demons, and now with all this behind him he returns to Nazareth. In some ways, it might have felt a bit like a homecoming except...as we know from reading...it wasn't.

I can't help but imagine how disappointed Jesus must have felt entering his Synagogue, his familiar synagogue, his familial synagogue in Nazareth. Surrounded by people who he's grown up around, people who he would have felt safe around, people he would have broken bread with, people he would have celebrated with, people he would have mourned and grieved with; it SHOULD (and I don't use this word lightly) have been a good place to inaugurate his ministry. Except, it wasn't

After reading and teaching, Jesus' reception was a bit, frosty? It's disappointed that the gathered congregation could only see him as who he was, a child of Joseph and Mary, the son of a carpenter. All they could see was the little boy who ran up and down the streets, the little boy who was first the apprentice to Joseph, and who perhaps now had taken over. All they could see was maybe the precocious teenager. I can't help but wonder if Jesus was as devastated as were those gathered were offended by him. No wonder Jesus has such scathing words. Jesus had changed and grown, and who he was, is not who he is, Nazareth wasn't ready to see who Jesus had become, they just remembered who Jesus was.

I can't help but think about our country, Canada, and draw a parallel. A few days ago we celebrated Canada Day. In years gone by Canada Day is has been a celebration of our national pride, such as it was. It would have been a day of fireworks, and BBQ's, of parties, and festivities, maybe even a cake. This year, it's had a very different feeling. Difficult questions were being asked, and with the revelation of unmarked graves on the sites of former residential schools, we have been forced to reckon insofar as people are willing and able, on a shameful part of our history.

While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started the process of truth telling, it was, by no means, the end of it. With more and more unmarked graves being identified, Canada is being forced to come face to face with the atrocities of the genocide that was perpetrated on the First Peoples of this land. In some ways, Canada is growing up. We're learning about what we did as a nation when we were younger. And I think for many of us, it's safe to say we're ashamed. I know I am.

I'm embarrassed to say this is a part of our story. It doesn't fit the narrative of the Canada that I came to know as a child. These unmarked graves in British Columbia and Saskatchewan are forcing us to come face to face with our history. A history some would rather ignore or minimize. And we cannot. This is where Maya Angelou's words intersect with the biblical story.

We cannot undo what's happened in the past, it cannot be un-lived. The Church is responsible for its actions with respect to Indian Residential Schools. The Government of Canada is responsible for its part in the design, implementation, trauma, victimization and the re-victimization of Canada's Indigenous Peoples. And we are responsible to claim this as a part of our history which we inherited.

Doing so will take courage. And the facing of this past might require more humility than we're comfortable with, it might require a humility that says, Canada needs to take a long hard look in the mirror. For us to prevent the horrors of the past from being repeated, we cannot ignore or deny this history, rather, we must embrace it as a part of our history, as uncomfortable as it maybe. Embracing this history does not mean that we agree with it, it means that we accept it as a part of our history, it's a part of who we are. And we learn and work to build right relationships now, so as not to repeat our past. When we look at our nations relationship with Indigenous People, Canada has a lot of work to do. And that means that we have a lot of work to do. Thankfully we have many people willing to not just hold up a mirror, but who are also willing to help guide us in conversations, both the difficult and the life giving conversations.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth, he was changed and he embraced his calling, even if others couldn't. And Jesus had a choice, then, as we read the scripture it might seem like he didn't but he did. He could have chosen to walk away from his calling, and return to the life of a carpenter, he could have chosen to remain as the Jesus that Nazareth knew, and from scripture we know that he didn't. And make no mistake that choice was a difficult choice to make. Not just because of how that choice ended, but also because of the cleaving and leaving he needed to do. By choosing to embrace his calling he chose to embrace the struggle and the pain of cleaving from his community to life into his calling to be the Messiah.

Embracing who we have been, both the comfortable and the uncomfortable parts is the essential stuff of growth. I've heard someone say we grow more when we're in the valleys than when we're on the mountain tops. It's the failures, not the successes which teach us the most. Me looking back on embarrassing parts of my past, besides teaching me what grace can look like, also teaches me what I need to work at. I don't know if I could ever return home and pastor my home congregation. But what I can embrace is the person I have become, and the person I am becoming.

And how about us? Can we recognize that the congregation we are today is not the congregation we were 10, or 20 years ago or even 16 months ago for that matter? Can we embrace the growth that we've experienced in that time? Are we willing to embrace the mistakes or embarrassing moments of the past and learn from them? Can we forgive ourselves for the cringe moments of the last year perhaps, and step forward into the new community that we are when we return? I hope so.

What has happened, has happened. What we have lived cannot be un-lived. However, when faced with courage, we need not live our past again. May God grant us courage to face our past, to learn, to grow, and to not repeat our mistakes.

Amen