

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2019

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table

Based on Isaiah 11:6-9; Luke 14:7-11

Some of you may recall a trip my daughter and I took to Jamaica a few years back. I was asked to preside over the wedding of some old family friends. It was an amazing week of warm sunny beaches, the best coffee I've ever tasted, and all the pampering an all inclusive resort could offer. I couldn't help but notice, though, as I ploughed my way through mounds of food in the dining lounge, or the difficult choice of red or white wine with dinner, or travelling on our air conditioned bus to an outing, that the world outside the gates of the resort were very different than inside. My observations made me more than a little uncomfortable, but were quickly pushed aside, as a poolside pina colada was offered to distract me from the afternoon sun.

Am I glad I went? A simple, yes.
Would I go again? If given the opportunity, probably.
Was my experience, 'just?' Not really.

The question of justice is not an easy one to discuss. It is a strong word that comes from places in our world where race,

and the colour of your skin divide and separate along strict lines. It is a word that comes from UN tent cities in Africa where displaced victims of violence become refugees because of military dictators. It is a word in corporate hierarchies, where the divide between the 'haves' and 'have not', grows wider by the year. But here, in Vernon, in our little piece of paradise we call the Okanagan? Justice issues?

Look around. We've got it pretty good, you know. Maybe you're living the retirement dream. Maybe you lucked out and have lived here all your life. Maybe you woke up one day and found yourself making a nest in this sleepy little town, with just enough activity to keep you amused, but away from the noise and congestion that comes with big cities. Look around the pews.

Race issues here? No
Violence in the streets? Well, just the occasional thing, but that's across town at Polson Park, not here.

But justice is not always so obvious.
Does the 'wolf live with the lamb' (Is11:6) in Vernon? In your family? In your sphere of influence? Hmmm.

The difficult truth, is that we have done a very good job of

insulating ourselves 'in here' from the problems 'out there'. We know that there are problems out there in the world. We see it on the evening news. We know there are problems in our city, but very carefully keep them away from our private lives, our church, and often, from our thoughts. We pray for the less fortunate. We share left overs from receptions to The Mission, and do our turn at the Community Soup Kitchen. Then we go home, close the door, and turn our attention elsewhere.

Have we served justice?
Yes, and no.
Does the 'leopard lie down with the goat?' (Is 11:6) No.

My friends, we do not need to build a wall, for we are very good at creating them in our hearts.

The matter of justice is not about race or greed or power. It is a matter of inequality. It is easy to point to big issues of ethnicity, or skin colour, or cultural differences, or religious preferences and fool ourselves into believing those are the only matters of justice or injustice that we need to bother ourselves with. But that would be a very shallow perspective of Christ's challenge to,

"Give this person your seat." (Lk 14:9)

Welcoming everyone, means that you have to open your heart to...

People you like AND people you don't like;
People you understand, AND people you avoid;
People who look like you, like to golf, and ski, and attend the book club like you, AND people who sit on the couch watching television all day or won't lift a finger for anyone at any time for anything;
People in the pews AND people not in the pews.

Martin Luther King Jr. said,
"Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

In our own way, we here at Knox have risen to the challenges before us. As we wrestle with the realities of an aging congregation, and the disconnect that comes when health and transportation and mobility issues do not allow some of our church family to attend worship, we have developed programs to go to them; we have volunteers who drive; we have passionate Elders who visit tirelessly, deliver bulletins and stay in touch. It is no longer 'us' and 'them'. It is simply 'us.' This, in my opinion, is quiet justice, working alongside us in the day to day.

But in the same breath, we struggle on other matters of injustice. When faced with homelessness in our own yard late last fall, our only response, was to shoo these nameless people off the grounds as quickly as possible, claiming safety concerns, growing complaints from the neighbours, and Sunday morning distraction at the windows.

Do I stand by these reasons? Yes.

But...

Did I welcome these strangers to our table?

No.

Did I try to find another alternative that served us both? No.

Did I even ask his name? No.

Did I serve Godly justice in this matter? No.

Whenever we separate in our minds, those who are welcome and those who are not, the gospel challenges us to be the kind of place that says: as church and as disciples:

'Friend, move up to a better place.' (Lk 14:10)

So am I saying that we should become a church who serves the homeless? No, at least, not directly. Am I saying that we should all become activists on the social issues of our community or our country? Not necessarily. Am I saying that we should not support all-inclusive resorts? No.

But I am suggesting that we begin to *nurture* the idea of justice in a more Holy way, because it has been said that,

"As we try to get closer to God, we cannot help but get closer to people."

Let's look at the matters of justice, both large and small with more than lip service during our prayers and the occasional insert in our bulletin.

Let's stop pushing the uncomfortable away from us, or pretending that justice or injustice is not something we have to deal with here. Let's give some 'legs' to the practical matters of welcoming people, not just at our front doors, but into our hearts. Let's stop labelling the 'justice issues' and start looking at the 'people.' Let's be civil enough, to at least ask people their name.

In a world of contrasts, Christ welcomes all people to His table:

The wise and the foolish...
The young and the old...
The weak and the strong...
The saint and the sinner...
He welcomes you...
He welcomes me...

Will you join me at the table?
Amen.