

RADICAL FORGIVENESS

Pentecost 14, Year A: Matthew 18:21-35

It has been an interesting week in which to reflect on Jesus' words to Peter on forgiveness. Wednesday evening, I returned home after a meeting here at the church to watch on television President Barack Obama's address on America's response to the violent campaign of the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; ISIL is the acronym. The group is also known as ISIS which stands for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. President Obama observed that "ISIL is not Islamic. No religion condones the killing of innocents. And the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslim. And ISIL is certainly not a state. It was formerly al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, and has taken advantage of sectarian strife and Syria's civil war to gain territory on both sides of the Iraq-Syrian border. It is recognized by no government, nor by the people it subjugates." [end quote]

The President made it clear in his address that America and its friends and allies – and presumably Canada is among its friends and allies – will show no mercy against the extremists. The appropriate response, he said more than once, is to "destroy" ISIL through attacks from the air. My guess is that the American-led campaign will succeed, but that the Mideast will remain unstable for many years to come; that violence begets violence. Talking about forgiveness in such a context seems absurd. President Obama used the word "barbaric" in referring to the ISIL militants. In truth, the word describes so much of what has happened in our world during my lifetime and my parents' lifetime. Certainly in international relationships, conflict, more often than not, leads to war in some form or another. We are a long way from loving our neighbour, let alone loving our enemy.

The same night President Obama spoke, some of the board of Koinonia Community Homes met with two representatives of Menno Homes K-W. Both groups are concerned about affordable housing in Waterloo Region, and Koinonia, our Christ Church corporation is in dialogue with organizations like Menno Homes K-W who are potential partners in an affordable housing project.

Martin Buhr, of Menno Homes K-W, surprised our board members in describing how dramatically the criteria have changed of late in what are called Expressions of Interest. Government grants are awarded to community organizations such as Menno Homes K-W and Koinonia based on how successful they are in meeting the current criteria. Our surprise was in realizing how quickly the community need in recent years has changed. The greatest need in affordable housing, right now, is for units that will rent for \$486/month, utilities included! Housing at this level would meet the needs, although it would also stretch the budget, of those receiving nothing more than their \$600 per month government cheques; and you can imagine how even at \$486/month rent how a personal budget would be stretched. Using the Food Bank, St. John's Kitchen, and the free clothing from Ray of Hope would not be an option. And Dan Driedger, also of Menno Homes K-W, told us that all of their new units also have a support worker on-site for between 10-15 hours a week in order to keep peace in the community.

It is a tall order for any organization, we realized, to meet the criteria in the Expressions of Interest submitted to the Region each year. Poverty in Waterloo Region has increased to unprecedented levels, and both the government and the community responses are inadequate to meet the need. I asked Martin and Dan if the real need was supportive housing and not just affordable housing, and they both agreed it was – although Menno Homes K-W is not receiving funding for the social workers they hire to be present at their affordable housing buildings.

Believe it or not, it was easier for me to place this situation on the paradigm of today's Gospel than it was to place the more traditional conflict in Iraq and Syria. I realized in staring at that \$486/month rental figure, utilities included, that there is no mercy in our community, even in our attempts at compassion, for the poorest of the poor; that our actions in forcing people to live in shelters or on the street, in relying on soup kitchens, food banks, and clothing depots say that we hold these, our neighbours and friends, accountable for being poor, for being unemployed or unemployable, and/or for having disabilities that prevent them from earning a living wage. Forgiveness in this context looks like providing supportive and affordable housing; in loving our neighbour by providing for the basics of food, clothing, shelter, and support.

When Koinonia received its charter in 1990, the board at the time had in mind affordable seniors housing on our property here – a project that would allow us to build an addition on our church. Some of our programming would have been dedicated to the needs of the seniors in that building, similar to the project at St. Peter's, Preston and St. Ansgar, London.

Our community situation has changed dramatically since then; problems of homelessness and poverty in 1990 were nowhere near as acute as they are at present. We need to get with the program – metaphorically and literally – to alleviate the unnecessary suffering of the poorest of the poor in our community. As a community, as a society, we need to be compassionate and caring; we need to love our neighbour in the practical hands-on ways that will benefit everyone in our community. We need to forgive those who are poor by using our community resources to provide support and an acceptable standard of living.

For some years now, the K-W Council of Churches has been concerned that our Out of the Cold programs have been letting our regional government off the hook when it comes to providing adequate services for people who are homeless. We have discussed how we have enabled the Region of Waterloo to ignore the crisis in poverty and homelessness. The events of the late summer and early fall that have seen several Out of the Cold venues close proceed from such conversations. As a Council, our great frustration is that through all the elections, to date, virtually no candidate has been willing or able to take a stand against the growing rates of poverty in Canada, in Ontario, and in Waterloo Region. It is not an issue that affects the majority, and more to the point, the majority who go to the polls to cast a vote. But the Council of Churches has said for years, and they are correct, that our taxes are intended to be used to support and care for those who are unable to earn a living wage; and we have fallen behind as a society. We need our political leaders to lead in addressing poverty and homelessness as it exists in the present tense; to wake up and smell the coffee, so to speak. Taking the lead in addressing issues of poverty and homelessness will not be a popular plank in any politician's platform, but it is a necessary plank if our community is to grow and become more humane.

As a church, we need to think about justice as well as compassion, and then our service to those in need as embodied forgiveness. The peace we crave in our communities and in our world requires something from us. It requires our attention, it requires listening to the call of voices both from without and within, and it requires action. For Peter, it meant redefining and expanding on the word "forgiveness". It means no less for us.