

Tribal Identity and Christian Mission

One of the smells I enjoy the most, is pie baking in the oven. Lynda and I have a nice large rhubarb plant in our garden. We've had to harvest it sparingly the last several years to allow it to develop. But this past spring and summer we have been able to enjoy rhubarb pie a number of times. You smell it when it's in the oven. And then after taking it out, a fruit pie has to sit for a bit and cool to make sure it won't be too runny. So you're smelling it even more intensely, before finally it can be enjoyed. Making, smelling and eating rhubarb pie reminds me of how the kingdom of God moves forward. We are given an idea. We think, we pray, we act, we smell it, and once in a while we even get to taste some progress as we move toward the fullness of the kingdom.

Revelation 7:9-10 says,

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!""

This vision of future reality, of where history is headed, is the bringing together of amazing diversity in order to worship a God who created that diversity and rejoices in it. Rhubarb pie a la mode. This vision fuels the present mission of the church, to reach beyond ourselves toward others.

The Bible uses interesting and sometimes seemingly outmoded categories in its attempt to describe the diversity of the human family. The use of the word "tribe" is a case in point. In American society we understand and use the categories of "nation" or "language", perhaps even "people" at times. But in general, for us the term "tribe" refers to historical rather than current realities. And using this category to describe a group of people, our minds might unconsciously jump to notions like "pre-modern", or even "materially and intellectually primitive", etc.

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines "tribe" as "a group of people that includes many families and relatives who have the same language, customs, and beliefs". Some further characteristics of tribe:

- Members probably identify with a particular ethnic name
- Often rooted in a particular locality
- Tribal membership ties one to particular cultural norms- scarification, clothing, language, food, celebrations, values, religion, etc.
- A tribe therefore has huge influence on its members regarding both outward appearances and inward ways of understanding reality. The tribe fixes the norms by which the members live.
- Being part of the tribe gives a sense of belonging, security, a participation in something larger than oneself or one's nuclear family
- The tribe gives guidance for life. It gives guidance for behavior in relationships with self, family, community and world. That is comforting because people need such guidance. It helps tremendously in knowing how to negotiate the many relationships in which tribal members participate.
- Being part of a tribe literally gives people their sense of identity. Having a strong sense of identity is good, it is a necessary part of being human. Tribes do that for their members.

There is also a shadow side to tribal identity. Tribal members have an almost inborn sense that their way of doing things is good, very good, quite likely superior to what happens in other groups. They often compare themselves to other groups, and come out favorably. It is very easy for this almost natural sense of superiority to be accompanied by an edge of fear when in the presence of other tribes. Members often hold themselves away from others because they deeply need the sense of belonging and security that comes from their tribe. Tribal identity is precious and needs to be protected. It feels like their very survival is at stake, so the clear demarcation points between tribes are reaffirmed again and again. And that can have the effect of deepening the fear. A rival tribe- how they think, how they interact, what they eat, etc.- can easily be perceived as a threat to one's own tribe's choices and way of life. What is not understood or experienced, generates fear.

Tribal members are most often quite content living within the tribal paradigm, and as time goes by it becomes more and more difficult to imagine living any other way. Tribal members can easily begin to think that their perspective is the only perspective, and that their way of doing things is the only good way.

This was the world into which Jesus was born. While the Roman empire existed as a multi-tribal reality, human organization had not for the most part gravitated toward multi-ethnic nations, and most peoples' lives at that time were guided and directed most substantially by tribal/ethnic identities.

We know that Jesus himself had a strong tribal/ethnic identity. True, the smaller tribal identities within Israel had faded, but Jesus grew up Jewish, which brought with it a cluster of elements that fostered a strong identity. He spoke Aramaic, also understood Hebrew and probably Greek. Jesus ate ethnic foods, followed Jewish customs, and considered the Jewish temple "his father's house". His sense of religious identity built on Jewish religious heritage including the law and the prophets.

Jesus too was born into a tribe and he accepted his tribal identity. It played a huge role in forming his personal identity.

At the same time, his deep relationship with the God of the cosmos somehow enabled him, building on what he knew about his own ethnic identity, to embrace people beyond his own group. God's intimate presence with Jesus led him to know that his tribal viewpoint and identity, as precious as that was, needed to be treated as partial, incomplete, and even as misleading at times. God came to Jesus as more than just a Jewish reality. Jesus' clear sense was that God's love was more than big enough to encompass all human lives. And so Jesus lived out of his awareness of God's love for himself and for every human being. This awareness was absolutely central to his moral compass. It enabled him to hold Jewish rules and ways lightly enough so that he could set them aside when he was led of God to do so. It gave him the freedom to listen deeply to persons coming from differing traditions. He was able to see, in the Jewish scriptures themselves, how God's love and care and respect were extended far beyond the Jewish community.

So in Luke 4 we learn about Jesus' visit to the synagogue in Nazareth. He began by identifying himself as the prophet spoken of by Isaiah. But then he pointed out that Jews are not the only people who receive God's attention and are responsive to God. Elijah was not sent to a Jewish widow to live during a famine, but to a widow in Sidon, a Phoenician. Elisha did not heal a Jewish leper, but rather Naaman the Syrian. These words were so threatening to the members of that little synagogue that they rose up to kill Jesus.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continued to demonstrate that God's love is for all and it does not distinguish between tribes. One of the biggest indicators of how seriously he took that message, was his insistence that Gentiles were to be invited and welcomed into the kingdom of God.

It is also worth noting how Jesus sent out his Jewish disciples on preaching and healing missions during which they could quite possibly connect with Gentiles as well as Jews. In Luke 9 and 10 there are two sendings, the first with the 12 disciples, and the second with 70. In 9:3, he tells them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic." Similarly in 10:4, it is stated, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals..."

These two lists, so close to each other, are not identical. This leads me to think that they are pointing to a reality beyond themselves. In looking at a Greek dictionary, the word for "staff" most popularly meant something like a "power wand" used to ward off evil or to perform acts of power. This is not a walking stick, but a symbol of power. The bags were for carrying food. When we take these elements together—no staff, no bag, no food, no money, no purse, no sandals, no second cloak—Jesus seems to be asking his disciples to not take with them anything that would lessen their dependence on God to provide for their needs, nothing that would project an air of self-sufficiency or superiority that would take away their need to depend on the hosts who would be welcoming them into their homes. It is like Jesus is saying, "set aside your tribal inclination to feel superior. Set aside everything that might encourage you in this erroneous attitude. Rather, leave it all behind, depend on God and on whomever God sends you to. Deliberately make yourselves vulnerable. Drop the pretenses, the fears and the inner attitudes that keep you at arms' length from others. Depend on God and give yourself entirely to the strangers to whom I am sending you. Prepare to develop relationships which are only possible because of your own need and vulnerability.

I do not think it is just incidental that in these "mission chapters", Luke 9 & 10, we find Jesus teaching the disciples about the dangers of tribalism. The teaching was needed. Toward the end of ch.9 we see Jesus heading to Jerusalem. Instead of doing the usual Jewish thing, which was to make a substantial detour to avoid going through enemy Samaritan land, Jesus heads straight through Samaria. When needing to stop for the night— and here's the vulnerable hospitality theme of the mission sendings, coming back again— Jesus sent messengers to a Samaritan village to see about lodging and food for the night. The village, not surprisingly, refused the request for hospitality because of the ongoing deep hostility between the Samaritan tribe and the Jewish tribe. James and John want to call on God to destroy the village by fire. The power they had received at the mission sending "over all demons and to cure diseases", they now want to use not to build relationships but to demonstrate their superiority with finality. Jesus rebukes them, and they go on to another village.

Then a chapter later, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. The hero of the story models the very mission on which the disciples had just been sent— he rescues a Jewish victim who is completely vulnerable, and provides healing, demonstrating God's character in crossing tribal and enemy boundaries to care for others. Jesus uses this story to show his disciples that tribal identity at its best can be a springboard toward compassion for all peoples.

By now you have figured out that, as I see things, it's not just Africans or Asians in today's world who are tribal. I am very much a white North American English speaking pizza lover. I basically take for granted our highly technological and individualistic culture. I am deeply imprinted by the cultural reality in which I grew up and in which I still operate. A further modifier is that I was born of Russian Mennonite

heritage. I'm proud of that, in a modest sort of way of course. I've spent most of my life looking back on Anabaptist Mennonite history with pride as I thought of the many who sacrificed much and gave their lives to live for Christ with high moral courage.

But now I sometimes catch myself wondering- did the isolation that grew out of the Anabaptist identity as ethically serious people, have a shadow side? Was a sort of tribalism born that not only developed a strong sense of positive Christian identity, but also nurtured a sense of moral and theological superiority that has enabled me to at times feel superior to those around me, and forget that I am a needy person saved by God's grace and not by my ethical seriousness or my genetic makeup?

Recently I learned of a story that has made me want to re-examine some parts of Mennonite history. Harvard historian Ben Goossen has demonstrated that in the 1930s, German Nazi social scientists did multiple studies in Mennonite communities around the world, resulting in conclusions that proclaimed Germanic race Mennonites to be of the highest Aryan genetic purity. Later, Russian Mennonites "freed" by the German army during WWII were marched back to Germany as prime examples of Aryan superiority. This is a highly sobering reality check. This story makes me ask myself: how often is it that I as a Mennonite have succumbed to an understanding of our tribalism that remains completely untouched and unhumiliated by Christ's wider love, but instead moves me to arrogance and self-righteous superiority? I really wonder whether the attitudes of superiority of Russian Mennonites vis a vis Canadian First Nations peoples that I experienced growing up in rural Saskatchewan, were not partly flowing out of these distorted Nazi racial attitudes that had recently been fed to many of our communities.

You probably know that I work for a Mennonite mission agency, and I've also worked as a missionary. That puts me in touch with what is happening in the mission world now. But it also often takes my thoughts to mission workers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Let's face it- like me, they too were tribal. They went out with the attitudes that their church and society gave them- mission fervor and also a sense of superiority. In their tainted and imperfect obedience, they entered into relationships with the "different ones" for whom Christ also died.

But as they did so, some amazing things started to happen. As they made themselves vulnerable and began to listen, their preconceived ideas were often shattered. People they had often presumed had no philosophy, no culture worthy of note, were found to have sophisticated systems of thought, a coherent cultural system, and clear ethical values.

When the missionaries were able to humble themselves enough to admit they needed help, outside observers such as anthropologists often helpfully challenged dominant perspectives.

As relationships between missionaries and the peoples to whom they were sent developed over time, many missionaries were able to progressively acknowledge the cultural values and gifts in the people who received them, and to move to a place of greater mutuality where exchange of perspectives was possible, where teaching was two directional, where the gospel itself was enriched by seeing it from the perspective of the culture in which the missionary was working.

As a result, many missionaries were able to move to a place where their tribalism could make room to embrace other perspectives and thus become more universal. Being in relationship with peoples who thought, looked and acted differently from them, over time moved these missionaries closer to Jesus.

Let's return to the present. The pattern we see in the gospels- Jesus sending his disciples on mission- is not just about a few strange or offbeat persons who want to visit foreign countries. We are all missionaries. It may have little to do, in your case, with verbalizing the gospel to anyone. Or, it could be that you speak often of Jesus to others. Either way, you are a missionary.

At the heart of it, a missionary is a witness: a witness to what God has done and is doing in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The saving power of Jesus, the power of the unconditional and unstoppable love of God for each one of us, has been and continues to be at work in our lives every moment of every day. We are witnesses to that love. To be a Christian is to admit our need for that love and proclaim its reality through our way of being. So when we get up in the morning, when we greet our spouse, when we mentor our children, when we are in traffic on our way to work, when we shop for groceries, when we sit at our desks, when we talk or text on the phone, when we visit family members, when we mow our lawns, when we gather in this place... all of these activities are means through which our identity is constantly communicated.

So what am I communicating? What are you communicating? Does our being reflect God's love? Is that love growing in us? Is our tribalism becoming a springboard to understanding of all peoples? Are our hearts opening to God's presence in all of our relationships? Is God's power and love welling up within us as Jesus promised it would? He said, "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water". This is true, here at Waterford Mennonite Church. I experience this reality with so many of you, you are already living it.

This is already happening in each of our lives. The work of God's Spirit is irresistible, irrepressible. You may not see it at this instant, you may not feel it. That is because we are often unaware of how God is using us. You are alive today, and you are a part of this community of faith. That means that God's love IS a reality in your life, and already the river of living water is flowing, already the healing has begun, already God's love has been, and continues to be poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and through us, to others.

As the songwriter says it, "The love of God is greater far than pen or tongue can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell."

The psalmist asks, "where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there...."

So we are already Christian missionaries, witnesses to God's love because the love of God is in us, and it does touch others and make a difference.

Remember the rhubarb pie? It's baking now, can't you smell it? I would just love to eat a slice right now!

We are already being missionary, praying, and acting as a missionary congregation, and it deserves to be celebrated! I think of our relationship with BBI, of our work in Ecuador through the Ross Richers, and of many other initiatives that our congregation is a part of.

I am also wondering if there are new horizons, new challenges for us as a congregation where we might begin consciously together in new ways to exercise the love that we are given, the love that is there,

waiting to be used. Not because this is how we gain our salvation, but because we freely choose in joy to share our love with others.

We live in a particular country with a particular context. It is my understanding that one of the most painful facts of life and culture in the USA today remains the racial divide that has existed from before the creation of the country until today

African Americans, while listening to others say that “All men are created equal”, were forced through slavery for centuries to grow wealth for whites instead of for themselves. Even after emancipation, and despite the past 8 years during which our country’s first black president served, what I see is that many different forms of cultural, economic and legal discrimination continue to maintain in our country’s power structure what is theologically a heresy- that whites are superior to blacks and therefore that whites deserve to be in control making the decisions while blacks suffer the consequences. I believe that these too are the effects of a tribalism that has not yet been transformed by the love of God. Video images of unarmed blacks being shot and killed by white police officers on a regular basis in America in 2016 is one clear indication among many that we all are badly in need of healing, and that some of the forms our tribalism continues to take keep choking out a fuller expression of the kingdom of God in this place and at this time.

I think it would be wonderful if we at Waterford would find a way to begin the healing process, if we took the time together to harvest the rhubarb, bake a pie, smell the odor, reflect, pray and act. Could we get there? Could we reach out hands of friendship and love to African Americans living nearby? Imagine eating meals with people, experiencing each other’s hospitality like the first disciples did when Jesus sent them out in mission. Might we reach out, not in superiority but in vulnerability, with nothing in our hands, with wounded hearts and the love of Christ? Could we take a cue from the missionary era of our NA churches? What if we had the audacity to begin this new way to exercise the love we’ve already been given, that’s already in our hearts. What if we began modestly to build some relationships. If we began to take some risks. If we leave aside our bag, our sandals, our cloaks... We can’t solve this problem, only God’s Spirit is big enough for that. But we already know how to love each other. We know how to care. That’s a great start. We do not know African American culture. Will we make mistakes? Of course we will. That comes with the territory. Will my racism show through? Of course it will. But I’m asking you- how will I be healed without relationship?