

240505 Red Dress Day - Indifferent judges, resilient widows, truth and reconciliation

Luke 18:1-8

1 Then Jesus[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my accuser.’ 4 For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ ”[b] 6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

When Mattea was five weeks old we took her to the funeral of my 97 year old Grandmother. As stories were told going back to her grandparents, Charleen and I had a conversation about birth and death and the generations. We thought briefly about Mattea’s potential children and grandchildren and at that funeral we had the sense of these 8 generations that were in some sense in that room from my grandmothers grandparents to my daughters grandchildren. We imagined Mattea’s funeral in the distant future with her grandchildren there and felt the weight of generations like I seldom have before. I had a similar sense when a group of 25 of us from Shantz went to Crow Shield Lodge a month ago and learned a bit of the indigenous focus on the generations - 7 generations back and 7 in the future. And I continue to think of truth and reconciliation over the generations - both the harm done over generations and the reality that healing and reconciliation might take generations.

On this Red Dress Day we symbolically remember with empty red dresses the many missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two spirit people who should be alive to wear them. Beloved Children of God. The dresses are red, recognizing violence, vitality, and the lifeblood connection between all of us regardless of race, nationality or religion. This is an uncomfortable day for we settlers as we acknowledge the wrongs historically done to the indigenous peoples and as we acknowledge the current systemic reasons why there is such a disproportionate number of indigenous women and girls who violently lose their lives. It's okay to be uncomfortable. This is not a pleasant topic.

As we delve into our Bible story today of a persistent widow and an uncaring judge, we do so in the light of Red Dress day. I am struck right off by that judge who just doesn't want to render a judgment for this widow. He doesn't respect her or care if she respects him. He just doesn't want to even hear the case. He's not interested in the justice of her case, one way or the other. He's just not open to even hearing it. This is so often true in our Canadian justice system, when it comes to crimes against indigenous people. *Seven Fallen Feathers* is the true story of seven indigenous teenagers who leave their Northern Reserve to attend school in Thunder Bay. Each of them dies and many of them end up in the river. In all cases the police files are quickly closed with files that say the cause of death is "undetermined." I quote: "Time and time

again, Indigenous people have been getting the message that they are less than worthy victims....police interests drop First Nations cases quickly and without explanation. It is the exact same complaint the families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have had for decades.”¹ End of quote. The story connected with one of our dresses - that of Sandra Johnston - also happens in Thunder Bay where her body was found under the ice of the river. Her case was also dropped fairly quickly even though it was named a homicide. The other story is that of Shelley Anderson whose sister Judy believes her case was not investigated properly because she’s indigenous and mentally disabled. Maybe the uncaring judge in our story really is relevant today.

The second character in this parable of Jesus is the persistent widow. Biblically widows are complicated. On one hand there is a clear Old Testament injunction to care for widows, orphans and foreigners who were seen as particularly vulnerable. On the other hand, many **actual** Biblical widows are particularly feisty. In her chapter on this parable, Amy-Jill Levine writes that “Biblical widows are the most unconventional of conventional figures. Expected to be weak, they move mountains; expected to be poor, they prove savvy managers; expected to be exploited, they take advantage where they find it. Tamar, the Bible’s first official “widow” (Gen. 38.11); Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah; Abigail (1 Sam.27:3; 30.5; 2 Sam. 2.2; 3.3); the wise woman of Tekoa

¹ Tanya Talaga, *Seven Fallen Feathers*, 290.

(2 Sam. 14.5) the widow of Zarephath...Judith - all manifest agency, and all defy the convention of the poor and dependent woman.

The...widow of Luke 18 similarly shatters the stereotype, even as she epitomizes the strength, cleverness, and very problematic motives of many of her predecessors.”² It isn’t totally clear from the parable if this widow’s cause is just. The Greek term often translated “justice” could as easily mean “to be avenged.” And it is possible that her unnamed adversary has not actually committed a crime. We don’t know from the parable. What we do know is that she is persistent and assertive, no passive victim. And her persistence leads to the judge granting justice/vengeance. Amy-Jill Levine again: “The NRSV's mild suggestion that the widow will 'wear out' the judge is another taming of the widow. The Greek uses a boxing term: the judge is concerned that the widow will give him a black eye." And so, in the end, he capitulates and renders a decision in her favour.

I want to pull out two things from this widow that might be relevant for us as we consider Red Dress Day today. One is the importance of persistence in seeking justice. In many ways this is what Red Dress day is about. Persistence in calling for justice. It is perhaps also our calling as Christians. Mark Davis writes about this parable that “In the end, justice can prevail, but it prevails because God’s people persistently speak the truth. The widow is how God operates,

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories Jesus Told*, 240.

particularly through a community of truth-tellers.”³ Truth telling. Part of what we are doing in hanging these red dresses is truth telling. Perhaps a small part of truth and reconciliation.

The second thing I want to pull from this widow is her strength, resilience, and persistence which to me is resonant with the strength, resilience, and persistence of the indigenous people of this land who continue to laugh and cry and struggle in the face of a past and a present that has been so damaging. For me I think of particular people with this character. Actually, I think of my sister, who is strong, resilient and loves to laugh.

As many of you know, My sister is indigenous and grew up in our settler Mennonite home and our very white Mennonite church. My parents adopted her when she was 2 after two years in the foster system, part of the sixties scoop where there was a focused effort to adopt indigenous children into white families in Canada. Much of her life has been balancing her identities as part of our Russian Mennonite family and part of the Siksika nation. These two identities both played out when she got married. First, a fairly traditional Mennonite wedding at Toronto United Mennonite Church, officiated by Charleen and I. And then, that summer, a traditional Indigenous wedding up at Sagamok reserve where her husband Fred is from. At least, that was what they wanted and maybe what happened. There was a sweat lodge beforehand. There was

³ Mark Davis, “Impunity and Persistence” in *Left Behind and Loving it*
<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/10/impunity-and-persistence.html>

a ceremony that paid attention to the land and acknowledged the four directions. There was dancing. But whether it actually looked like a traditional wedding at Sagamok was unclear. You see, the knowledge of what a traditional wedding would have been had been completely lost. They invited an indigenous Elder from somewhere West to help them plan and carry out an indigenous wedding. They knew elements of ceremony and put them together in what was an incredibly meaningful wedding celebration. It was a reclaiming and renewing of culture. But the particular traditions had been taken from them. They'd been taken from them by the schools.

I want to talk a bit about the schools because these things are connected. Both of Fred's parents went to Residential schools, as did their parents. They went to the docks and were taken away from their family and home and culture by boat. This wasn't optional. The first residential school was opened in 1831 in Brantford. After 1880 they were more intentionally created by Christian churches and the Canadian government as an attempt to both educate and convert Indigenous youth and to assimilate them into Canadian society. The last such school closed in 1996. Most residential schools were run by the more mainstream churches, but Mennonites ran schools too; three schools in northern Ontario: Poplar Hill, Stirland Lake, and Cristal Lake. I know a beautiful Mennonite woman from a previous congregation who worked in the kitchens of one of these Mennonite-run residential schools. She

went North because she loved children, and she was responding to her faith - that Jesus loves the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight - Jesus loves the children of the world. She meant no harm, she wanted only to love them with Jesus' love, and to feed them. She sacrificed several years of her life in their service. To tell the truth about our past does not negate the purity of her heart or her service, but it does say she participated in a system that betrayed her trust and the trust of the children and families she wanted to love and serve in Jesus' name. A system that continues to have generational impact.

As I think about Fred, Kristen, and his parents, I am amazed by their resilience, perseverance, and strength as they continue to reclaim and renew their indigenous heritage in the face of many barriers.

What if, as an exercise in imagination, we changed the setting - and chose another group to be the victim of this residential school system? What if we imagine instead that the government had a desire to eliminate the Conservative Mennonites, or the Old-Order Amish - to kill the Mennonite in the child? Perhaps these children were rounded up, taken hundreds of KM away to residential schools, forbidden to speak PA Dutch, or German. Let's imagine they were not permitted to retain their names - they would not be permitted to remember if they were Baumans or Martins or Brubachers or Kuepfers or Shantz's or Snyders? Traditional clothing would be forbidden. Let's imagine they were

forbidden to sing and kept away from home for Christmas and Easter, and the Bible was forbidden too. They would not learn the basics of farming, or horses, or preserving food, or keeping a home, or raising children, or anything that is recognizable as a traditional old-order Mennonite way of life. It's a devastating imaginative exercise, because it does not take long to realize that there would be almost nothing left of the culture or faith within a generation or two. And to extend the metaphor even further on this red dress day, what if Old Order Mennonite girls and women were found to be missing or murdered at a rate four times higher than the national average and the justice system seemed indifferent?

Cultural Assimilation is not a new concept - it's as old as the hills. It's the concept that fuelled the Babylonian exile, where the Hebrew people of Judah were shipped off from their homes, away from their Temple, to Babylon. Even before that, the people of Israel were taken from their homes and sent to Assyria. It's brutally effective, much of the time. In the case of the people of Judah, after 40 years of exile a remnant returned and renewed the faith in ways that were different from before but consistent. In the case of the indigenous peoples of this land, somehow identity has remained and culture is being reclaimed.

One of the things that struck me a month ago when 25 of us from Shantz went to Crow Shield Lodge was how gracious and hospitable our hosts were. Unlike the Persistent widow of our Bible text, there was no

threat of a black eye and no shaming. Just a desire for relationship, for learning, for truth, for healing, for taking the next steps towards reconciliation. And unlike the uncaring judge of our parable, and in contrast, Scripture lifts up Jesus, whose message to those of us who hold positions of privilege and power, is the responsibility to work for justice, especially in response to the voices that persistently name the harms they are experiencing.

In the Gospel of John we hear these words: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32) We have spent some time today with some uncomfortable truths - the first part of truth and reconciliation. I invite each of us to continue in that search for truth and understanding as, on this red dress day, we confront some of these truths. It is in truth that we can be set free and be part of setting free our indigenous neighbours. AMEN.