

SERMON
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGI-GJtD7UE&index=53&list=PLQDu-DgFb3Rg2QKr6iNzkduyJD2zAb4JK>

One World, Many Nations (Social Gospel Part 3)

March 19, 2017

Mathew 4:1-11. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

“It is a sad feature of our humanity that we are disposed to hate what we do not understand; we naturally suspect and distrust what we do not know. Hens are like that too! When a strange fowl comes into a farmyard all the hens take a pick at it – not that it has done anything wrong, but they just naturally do not like the look of its face because it is strange. Now that may be good ethics for hens, but it is hardly good enough for human beings.”

These are the words spoken by Nellie McClung at the turn of the 19th century, and yet they still ring true today. Nellie was an ardent supporter of the Social Gospel movement. She believed in sharing the good news of the gospel with others, and she supported many of the core elements of the movement. With the other social gospellers, she fought for temperance, for women’s suffrage, for the labor movement, for improving healthcare and education, and against the causes of poverty. The Social Gospellers believed that they were building a heaven on earth through their work in social justice. In 1912, Walter Rauschenbusch coined the term “Christianizing the Social Order” and in his book of the same title, he examines and questions the relationship between Christianity and social reform. He writes:

“Christianising the social order means bringing it into harmony with the ethical convictions which we identify with Christ.”

In other words, our institutions and our society should be modeled on, and should reflect the life and teachings of Christ. If we do this, then we are taking a step towards bringing the Reign of Christ on Earth. Now, as a Christian, I can not argue with that. Rauschenbusch goes on to write:

“The purpose of all that Jesus said and did and hoped to do, was always the social redemption of the entire life of the human race. (and) If we regard him in any sense as our leader and master, we cannot treat secondary what to him was

his mission. ... the obligation to complete what he began comes upon us with an absolute claim to obedience.”

As people of faith, isn't this is what we believe. That we are called to continue in Christ's mission. But the key here, is that we are called to continue the mission with the same love and compassion that Christ had. We are not called to claim superiority because of our education, because of our economic status, because of our gender, or because of our culture. We are not called to have cultural superiority.

At the time of social gospel movement, there was mass immigration into North America. It was period of industrial growth and many were coming in search of work, and with the dream of a better future. In 1909 Woodsworth published a book called “Strangers in Our Gate” which examined the mass immigration and concluded:

“Foreigners in large numbers are in our midst and more are coming. How are we to make them into good Canadian citizens? First of all, they must in some way be unified. Language, nationality, race, temperament, training, are all dividing walls that must be broken down.”

Sadly, these are attitudes that are still live today with the increase of refugees into Canada. Now even though Woodsworth and other social gossellers advised Canadians to overcome their attitudes of superiority, the message to the immigrants was still very clear: they should assimilate. They should take on the lifestyle of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Assimilation. When it comes to any people, any race, any culture or any nation other than White Anglo Saxon Protestant – they were all required to assimilate. They were required to become “Canadian.” Nellie McClung tells the story of a young Italian boy, who had been in the country for two years. He was asked by his teacher to sit next to a newly arrived compatriot so that he might interpret for him. But the boy flatly refused and told the teacher that “he had no use for them young dagos.”

“You see” said the teacher sadly, when telling the story, “the boy had caught the Canadian spirit.”

And, sadly, it was this same ‘Canadian Spirit’ that was behind the formation and the running of the Residential schools.

The United Church inherited 12 residential schools, and 39 day schools. And the methods used in these schools followed a time-tested method to obliterate culture. The children were forbidden to speak their language, forbidden to tell their stories, forbidden to honor the traditions and teaching passed down from their grandparents. They were forced to have identical hair cuts, wear identical uniforms, and pray in unison. And they were severely punished or abused if they went against any of the rules.

As the gospel was shared with them, the goal in many cases was not to encourage them into a personal relationship with Christ, instead, it was to make them good Canadian citizens, and “better” members of society. The church was fulfilling its responsibility to work with the state to provide educational and religious services, so that the people would become less of a burden on society. It was a continuation of the missionary agenda to Christianize and civilize the Indigenous people; to provide education and health care, in return for denominational affiliation. The government saw these schools as a means of assimilation. The church saw these schools as means of conversion; a way of doing good works for those less privileged; and an example of social gospel in action.

But this is not the social gospel that we talk about. We think of the social gospel as fighting against injustice. Sadly, the story of residential schools does not even appear in many social gospel text books. I find it hard to believe that leaders like Gladden, Rauschenbusch, McClung, Woodsworth and others did not speak out against what was happening. That they turned a blind eye to the government's policy of aggressive assimilation. That they ignored the 80 residential schools operating across Canada at the peak of the system in 1931. That they never asked if it was right for 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and Metis children to be forcefully removed from their homes and made to attend schools. You have to wonder, why didn't any of the social gospellers stop and ask – is this behaviour really the example that Christ set?

Our reading today from Matthew 4, tells us of when Jesus was in the wilderness. Jesus had nothing, he was hungry, but still he does not give in to the temptation of receiving bread, receiving special spiritual attention, or being given the power and wealth of the kingdoms. When the explorers, settlers and traders first arrived in this land, they realized how much they needed Indigenous Peoples to survive. The winters were harsh, and the Indigenous people knew how to grow food in this land. But very soon, that relationship shifted. Leaders of empires,

trading companies, and the Christian church, all gave in to temptations. They wanted the wealth and power, so they began to seize lands, to exploit Earth's resources, to dominate the inhabitants, to disregarding their ways of praying and sharing food. Even as they shared the gospel with them, it was without any recognition of the presence of the Creator with the First Nations. They gave into the temptation to become culturally superior.

But how does this affect us today? We could argue that this is history. That is has nothing to do with us. It's in the past. We might shrug it off as thinking this was another generation. We can even hide behind the words of United Church apology given to the First Nations in 1986. But whether we like it or not, we must acknowledge that we have inherited this story. It is part of who we are. We must learn from our history, not hide from it.

Perhaps it is time for us to return to the wilderness and to fast; time for us to seek the spiritual courage to speak up. At this season of Lent, perhaps it is time for us to lament the past. And if we are to change, we must begin to live into the apology given to the First Nations. We must begin to live in a way that reflects love, compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness. We must learn to live with all humanity, whatever their culture or religion. This is the way that Christ taught us to live. This is true way to bring the Kingdom of God to others. The social gossellers used their voices many times to speak up for social, political and economic injustice. Today, as we face a world with so many cultural and religious differences, it is time for us to live out our call of reconciliation. It is time for us to live out our mission described for us in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

AMEN.