
Be the change (still)
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 12, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mathew 15:10-28

I feel a bit of deja vu right now. We just read the same scripture reading that we read last week. And the title of this reflection is the same as last week too. Except for the addition of the single word “still”.

And one more piece of deja vu. I want to ask you - as I did last week - given those scripture readings and the title “be the change” what do you think this reflection will be about? What are you hoping that I talk about? What are you hoping that I will avoid talking about?

And leaving all that aside, why on earth would Rev Paul think that particular scripture passage was worth hearing even once - let alone twice.

In the opening of the reading, Jesus said that what goes into your mouth does not matter. What matters is what comes out of your mouth. Well, that is classic Jesus. He was clearly trying to deliver a stinging attack on the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees cared about what went into your mouth. And Jesus cares about what comes out of your mouth. Or in plain English - the Pharisees cared about rules. And Jesus cared about relationships.

And - if we stop reading right there - we have a coherent message that perhaps will not offend us. Jesus is simply lifting up the idea that how we live our lives ... including how we speak to other people, is important. That’s a nice safe message for today.

Unfortunately (for us), the reading does not stop there. In the very next paragraph, Jesus completely ignores a person because she is not Jewish, and because she is a woman.

Jesus then moves from ignoring her to insulting her. Comparing the non-Jewish woman to a dog. In the first part of the reading Jesus states that it is what comes out of our mouths that defiles us. And in the second part of the reading, Jesus uses his own mouth to spew hatred at a complete stranger. Using words that are misogynistic and xenophobic.

What is going on here? Is Jesus contradicting himself? Perhaps something very unusual is going on. Or perhaps something very common is going on. Perhaps something is going on that goes on even today.

In order to make any sense of this, let's start by reviewing the list of things that Jesus said defile a person.

[image: evil intentions, slander]

“Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander”. What do you think of that list? To me, the list is quite limited. In fact, it basically only covers the social conventions found in the 10 commandments. I hope we all notice that there is nothing against hatred. There is nothing against intolerance. Nothing against racism, sexism, or any other “ism” you can think of. Nothing even against slavery. The list of actions that Jesus says are bad for us speak only to how to treat people in our own social group. And in Jesus day, in the Jewish community, even Jewish women were marginalized.

So if we read the text in a literal way, Jesus's xenophobic and misogynistic words in the second part of the reading do not actually violate the prohibitions he set up in the first part of the reading. Jesus does not contradict himself here. He just uses a very low bar when it comes to moral behaviour. And we should expect this. Jesus grew up in culture that was narrow-minded, racist, exclusivist and sexist.

We like to think that we are more advanced today. But speaking personally, I too grew up in a culture that was narrow-minded, racist, exclusivist, and sexist. Have we really made

no progress on racism and related social diseases in the past 2000 years? Really?

This reflection is going off the rails here. So, let me start again from a different angle.

Life has gotten more complicated over the years. Life was simpler and perhaps easier in “the good old days”. Whatever that means for you. Let’s take our minds back to simpler days. Pick whatever decade you like. Pick a decade where you felt like you really knew what was going on.

Perhaps you imagine something like this ...

[image: leave it to beaver]

Or something like this

[image: happy days]

Or perhaps you were in Brantford in the mid-1950’s when West street became a public swimming hole.

[image: west street flood]

And kids were actually allowed to play in the water.

[image: brantford parade]

Or perhaps you were at this parade - I have no idea what year this was, but Larry or someone can likely estimate the year based on the automobiles in the picture.

Take your mind back to whatever point in the past it was where you felt like life was

simple and you really knew what was going on.

And think about what you learned in school. There must be some basic knowledge we can all agree on. Now what might that be?

[image: 3 states of matter]

Let's see ... ok ... how many states of matter are there? What do you remember learning in school. I'm sure we all learned that there are 3 states of matter: solid, liquid, and gas. Hmm. But wait a minute. There are actually more than 3 states of matter. Because we also have plasma, supercritical fluid, degenerate matter, bose-einstein condensate, fermionic condensate, superfluids, supersolids, quantum spin liquids, string-net liquids, time crystals, and black superionic ice.¹

That's quite a list. And even if you forget that list, remember plasma.

[image: plasma]

Plasma is very uncommon on Earth - except in the ionosphere - but plasma is the most common state of matter across in the universe. And we completely ignore plasma when we pretend that there are only 3 states of matter.

The simple reality is that our world has gotten more complicated over time. And yet, most of us cling to the idea that there are only 3 states of matter - because we want to cling to days that were simpler for us.

Here's another example. When I grew up, there were only 2 genders. Male and female. Now, there are many. A partial list includes cisgender, transgender, non-binary, intersex, genderqueer, gender-fluid, gender non-conforming, gender-expansive, agender,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_states_of_matter

gendervoid, omnigender, and pangender.²

The simple reality is that our world has gotten more complicated over time. And yet, many of us cling to the idea that there are only 2 genders - because we want to cling to days that were simpler for us.

And please do not think that I'm picking on anybody here. I myself am sometimes forced to face the reality of my own age too. I feel out of my depth too sometimes.

[image: Tesla 3]

Recently, Marjorie and I test drove a Tesla model 3. And I had my own moment of feeling like I did not know what was going on. As the salesperson was explaining the auto-driving features, the different charging options, the touch screen and other delights, I was saying to myself, "I just want to know how to open the damn door".

[image: Tesla 3 dash]

But don't worry. Once I actually did get in and was presented with the large centrally located screen and I pushed a few buttons I felt right at home. The Tesla 3 is just a big iPhone on wheels. I can handle that. But there was a period of about 12.5 seconds when I felt completely out of touch with today. And somewhere in the middle of that 12.5 seconds the salesperson said, "welcome to the future!" And I was not sure if that was intended as a promise, or as a threat.

The simple reality is that our world has gotten more complicated over time. We are also more complicated sociologically. As I said earlier, when I grew up, racism was the default. Exceptionalism was the norm. Many of us pretended that we lived in a "Christian country", whatever that meant.

² <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/relationships/a36395721/gender-identity-list/>

[image: brantford immigration partnership]

Today, in 2023, society is more complex. And more interesting. Not only do we no longer have only 3 states of matter. We have - even here in Brantford - people from all around the world. With their own ethnicities, senses of dress, languages, beliefs, ethics, religions, faiths, sexualities and genders, and modes of communication. We even have vegans among us. It's a very colourful world today.

[image: colourful world]

As Canadians, we are also - slowly - becoming better educated about our own history. For example, take the history of indigenous Canadians. When I was a child, we used to sing that song you know the one ... “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, They are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world”.

[image: take the Indian out of the child]

But today if we want to sing that song we need to sing it against the backdrop of how the Church abused indigenous children in residential schools. Ask indigenous people if the Jesus they met in school loved all the children of the world. And in particular, the red ones.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that I expect that none of you are finding hope in this reflection yet. Where is the hope that some day racism will be a subject only found in history books and not visible on our own streets?

Well, I've got some good news and some bad news. And that is summarized nicely in this cartoon.

[image: who wants change?]

We all want to live in peace and equity. And that means we must all want change. We must want change because we do not currently live in peace and equity. We want change. The good news is that we can do it. The bad news is that we have to do it ... ourselves.

I am always intrigued when our government want to give money to fight racism. Racism comes from our hearts. How can money fix that? Some things in life are free. And liberating ourselves from small-minded fears including racism or sexism can be done any time, anywhere, for free.

[image: be the change you want to see in the world]

Mahatma Gandhi summarized this nicely saying “be the change you want to see in the world”. In my experience, that actually works for some people. But many people I know - when they want change - just complain.

[image: complaining]

And that generally accomplishes nothing. I agree with Gandhi that we need to be part of the solution. The government - or the church - cannot change our hearts. We have to do that ourselves.

[image: change what you can, accept what you can't be know the difference]

Many of us grew up with this attitude. “Change what you can, accept what you can't, and be smart enough to know the difference”. There is much to affirm in this statement. But I think it is also limiting. Because how do we know what we can change and what we cannot change? I think we often imagine that many things are impossible and then we do

not even try.

[image: people who are crazy enough to change the world are the only ones who do]

I want you to put your minds back in time again. But this time, only 3 years. Because I'm sure that most of us have stories we can share about something that was impossible for you 3 years ago that you now do on a routine basis. How many of us would have said it was impossible to use video conferencing technology 3 years ago and now use Zoom on a regular basis? How many of us would have said it was impossible to use a computer 3 years ago and now use a tablet, or have learned to use your phones better? How many of us would have said it was impossible to use our computers for more than email and FaceBook 3 years ago who now consult online calendars and use YouTube and buy things online? How many of us learned to make videos and to do audio processing? The pandemic has forced many of us to do things today that 3 years ago we would have called impossible. And yet, today, we do those "impossible" things all the time.

[image: things are only impossible until they're not]

We were taught to accept the things we cannot change. And I agree with that. But we should not minimize our own capacity to change and to grow. I even believe that we as a society will someday put an end to racism. But if we stop trying, we will not achieve that. We will defeat racism if we keep trying.

[image: you miss 100% of the shots you don't take]

Do we want to fight racism? Do we care enough to try? Today, it is very easy to make some forward progress on racism. When you go shopping, simply be friendly with everyone you meet. Exchange a greeting. Go a little deeper if they reciprocate. Don't target any particular demographic. Just reach out with compassion to all people. If you are here in Brantford, I guarantee if you try reaching out to everyone you will touch

people from many different backgrounds and cultures. You can meet and greet the world without leaving town ... and that is a wonderful gift.

The Pharisees cared about rules. Jesus cared about relationships. The rules says that we should be afraid of people we do not know. The drive to build relationships says that a stranger is just a friend you have not yet met.

Go and make friends with the world. You do not even have to leave Brantford to do it.

Be the change.

Amen.