

Sermon: "Freedom"

In my small circle of friends there are 2 women who were victims of incest when they were young girls. One of them has worked through a lot of the pain, and the awful memories, with the help of therapists, and survivor's groups. The other has only just begun to allow the memories to come to the surface. Hearing the stories has deepened my awareness of the vital role of good fathering, good parenting, in the lives of children.

Talking with my friend who has had years of therapy has been good. Because of what she has told me, I am not totally in the dark when I talk with the woman who is just beginning her healing journey. I now understand some basic things. When a young child is poorly treated, abused by an older relative, who is should be worthy of trust, that child can grow up with the sense that the world is not a safe place, and that you cannot trust all people, or take them at face value. These are hard lessons, and can lead to a lonely, isolated view of life.

It becomes a strategy for personal safety to keep people at arm's length. That way it is harder for them to hurt you. Children who are victimized often have the sense that these things happened to them because they somehow deserved it- they did something, or failed to do something, and they are being punished. Even deeper, a child can come to believe that they are just not worth very much- based on the way they have been cruelly used. They can grow up imprisoned by memories and feelings that are buried deep inside.

In the last two years I have been part of the Jubilee Program for Spiritual Formation and Direction. Part of what I have been studying is spiritual psychology. Spiritual psychology takes a faith-based approach to questions of how we become the people we seem to be, and how can we move towards healing the parts of us that have been wounded, or broken by life.

Father Thomas Keating, the key figure in the Centering Prayer Movement, believes that each of us develops unconscious strategies we use to try to be as happy as possible. He says these emotional programs kick in to help us maintain the sense of control, or security, or esteem we feel we need.

People who need to feel in control might be anxious about a long car trip if they don't get to drive. People who find their self-worth in their bank account might have an especially hard time when an investment fails, or when their neighbour wins a lottery, and now has more money than them. People who have been

abused have great difficulty making real friends, because vulnerability and intimacy are too overwhelming.

Events leave marks on our unconscious selves, and if we have not tended those wounds, and experienced healing, when things happen in life that push our buttons, those emotional programs can take over, and direct what we say and do.

This past week in Winnipeg, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has begun hearing the stories of men and women whose lives were affected by the native residential schools. Some of those schools were run by churches. Federal policy mandated that thousands of children be forcibly removed from their families, and from their communities. They lived in dormitories and attended classes far from home, and far from the people, and customs, and culture, and language that they knew. Many were punished for speaking their mother tongue, or praying according to their traditions. Even the food was from a foreign culture.

Over the years, especially when I lived in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, I have met ministers and teachers who worked in those schools. Many of them are well-meaning, loving, generous Christian souls. I have also met former students who were grateful for the education and opportunities that came their way. But even those who have positive stories can also describe the loneliness, and fear, the helplessness and sadness that shaped them from a tender age. There are also horrific stories of physical and sexual abuse.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will hear how these terrible things have left individuals, and families, communities, and cultures, wounded and hurting. They will hear how the evil of these events has haunted people for generations. I do not envy the task before them. It is important, and heart-wrenching work, to create a safe space where the stories will be heard, and the people will be treated with respect.

I listened to an interview with Nobel laureate and retired Anglican arch-bishop Desmond Tutu. One of the things he is best remembered for is his work as the chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He heard countless stories from both perpetrators and survivors of the apartheid system. I find great hope for the possibility of healing in his comments. He said, *"I was amazed, first of all, at how powerful an instrument it is being able to tell your story... you could see in the number of people who for so long had been sort of just anonymous, faceless non-entities just being given the opportunity for something to rehabilitate them.... it actually was a healing thing. We had a black young man who had been blinded by police action in his township, and he came to tell his story. When he finished, one of the TRC panel asked him, "Hey,*

how do you feel?" And a broad smile broke over his face and he was still blind but he said, "You have given me back my eyes." You felt so humbled that people would feel that that was how the healing for him would have taken place."

Tutu went on to say, *" one of the things that constantly amazed us was the remarkable magnanimity of people. All people, black, white, Africans, and Americans. I mean, human beings can leave you speechless, really. I mean, they can leave you speechless by the horrible things they do ...but they also leave you speechless with the incredible things. We saw so many times people who ought to have been bristling with bitterness and anger, when they meet the perpetrator, actually being able to embrace. ...despite the fact that it was not a requirement, when people were applying for amnesty, almost always they would turn to the victims or the survivors or the family if the person had been killed, and they would turn to them and say, "Please. We know it's very difficult but please forgive." And, as I say, almost always the victims would. "*

Too often in the world we live in, the idea that people can change is dismissed as idealistic. Too often in the world, the possibility that people on opposite sides of a conflict, or a crime can move through the hurt, to a place of grace and forgiveness, is ruled out as unrealistic. Too often in the world, the victims of hatred, and racism, and systemic violence and injustice are silenced, and pushed to the side.

In our gospel story this morning, Jesus and his friends have sailed across the Sea of Galilee, and landed outside of Jewish territory. They stepped out of their boat, and were met on the shore by a person the story calls the town madman. This man did not have proper clothes, or a home. He was living in the cemetery. Who knows what haunted this man, or how he came to be in this condition. The culture he lived in would be quick to say that he was possessed by evil spirits. We might see him differently.

When this man saw Jesus he cried out, and seemed to fear him, but also sensed God's presence in him. The story says that Jesus ordered the unclean spirit out of the man- but it does not tell us how he did that, or how long it took. It might have been a matter of days, or weeks. Many times the man threw himself onto the ground in convulsions, and his bonds would have to be re-fastened.

How does a wounded soul become healed, and made whole? Thomas Keating, the teacher I mentioned earlier, believes that when we quiet ourselves, and enter into silent prayer, we are making room for God's spirit to be at work within us, in the depths of our unconscious, where we keep all the memories, and all the

hurt, and the woundedness. He also believes that contemplative prayer helps us to develop the capacity to observe ourselves from the inside. We can learn to recognize the moments when we might be overwhelmed by the power of the old hurts and do or say things that only make things worse. We can break the cycle of being possessed by the past. We can be made free.

Maybe that is something like what was happening with Jesus and the man who lived in the cemetery. The cemetery is such a powerful image. On the literal level, it suggests that the other people of the town had banished him. On the symbolic level, it suggests that this man was bound up in things of the past, that were preventing him from living in the present moment.

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Mob. My name is Mob," he said, because many demons afflicted him. And they begged Jesus desperately not to order them to the bottomless pit.

A large herd of pigs was browsing and rooting on a nearby hill. The demons begged Jesus to order them into the pigs. He gave the order. It was even worse for the pigs than for the man. Crazy, they stampeded over a cliff into the lake and drowned.

When I talked about this story on Wednesday at the communion service at Queen's, the people there asked questions about the pigs. I mentioned that pigs were considered to be unclean by the Jews, but that Jesus and his friends were visiting Gentile territory. One person said that this detail of the pigs going over the cliff made her think that the story might be more like a parable than straight history.

I think the death of the pigs serves as the excuse for the people of that town to send Jesus away. Even though Jesus had been able to help the man who used to live in the cemetery, Jesus was too much for them. Their momentary sense of awe and wonder gave way to their fear of change. Their own emotional programs kicked in.

But the man who had formerly been possessed by demons is no longer afraid. He is prepared to live a new life, and asks to join Jesus and his friends when they get back in their boat to leave. Jesus sends him back, to begin the long term work of bringing the good news of freedom to his neighbours. Jesus says, "Go home and tell everything God did in you." And that is exactly what the man does. Thanks be to God. **Amen**