

DECISION TIME

September 16, 2018

Pentecost 17

[James 3:1-12](#)

[Mark 8:27-36](#)

(prayer)

I read a very disturbing [article](#) this past week. I shared it on my Facebook page with a one word comment: “despicable”.

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The article concerned a deposition given in a Minnesota sexual abuse lawsuit against the Roman Catholic *Twin Cities* and *Winona Dioceses*.

Robert Carlson, who in the 1980s was the chancellor of the *Archdiocese of Minnesota and St. Paul* had the role to investigate abuse claims.

He admitted in his deposition that he never personally went to police, even when a clergy member admitted to inappropriate behavior.

When he was asked whether he *had known it was a crime for an adult to engage in sex with a child*, his testimony was “[Back then] I’m not sure whether I knew it was a crime or not.”

Then he seems to want some credit for admitting:

“I understand **today** [that] it is a crime.”

So, when did you first realize it was a crime for an adult — including priests — to have sex with a child?

“I don’t remember.”

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Disturbing!

Despicable!

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Our siblings in the Roman Catholic Church are going through a crisis of self-realization that there is a wide ranging pattern of covering up of abuse by priests.

A couple of years ago, we had a movie night here at the church when people watched the Oscar winning picture “[Spotlight](#)” about the Boston Globe’s investigative journalism that uncovered the complicity of the church hierarchy in hiding incidents of abuse and protecting the abusers.

For the RCC of 2018, this are not isolated incidents involving a rogue bishop here and there, reassigning a *problem* priest.

It is not limited to an American church issue. It is worldwide.

And although there are hints of progress, the vatican is moving at a snail’s pace.

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This is not only a RCC problem.

Priests, Pastors and Ministers of all denominations and stripes have used their positions of trust to satisfy their own unethical desires: against children and vulnerable adults.

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The structure of the United Church of Canada does not include an office of Bishop to whom the clergy are accountable. The *episcopal* function in the UCCan is housed within the Presbytery: specifically it’s pastoral relations committee.

[Beginning next year, that function will be taken over by a national Office of Vocation.]

As someone who has been active in Presbytery work for all of my 28 years of ordained ministry, I

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have personally been involved in three investigations of pastoral sexual misconduct... thank God, none of them involved children.

In two cases, the minister perused a relationship with someone who had come to the church for counselling about their marital issues. The other involved a minister who used the contact information collected from a person who had come to the church for financial help to call them up and try to begin a sexual relationship.

All of the cases, in the UCCan, the RCC or any church have very little to do with sex and everything to do with an abuse of trust and power.

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Not every minister who is embroiled in a case of pastoral sexual misconduct is a chronic abuser. Some are predators and some are wanderers.

In my experience, one of the signs of a predator is that they tend to want to discuss the process more than the facts of the situation.

In one of the cases I was involved in, the pastor took "no" for an answer, realized they had personal issues that were behind the offense and took ownership of their actions and sought to repair themselves.

And not every case of power abuse is sexual in nature. I was involved in one that involved financial impropriety.

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Of course, even honest personal reclamation does not automatically qualify a person to maintain or attain a position of trust and power.

But, sometimes a truly repentant person can get a deserved second chance.

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I know that this is heavy stuff.

But it points to a wider point I want to make.

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Not every character flaw had to do with sexual misconduct or financial misdeeds.

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But this points to something that is much more common.

Pretty much everyone of us has done and said things that we do not want to repeat. Actions, words (inactions, unspoken words) that we would love to do over.

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And... I believe that there is no one who is beyond redemption. I believe that everyone has the possibility that the light of self-reflection will shine bright enough for significant changes to be made.

I have seen it in the circles of my own family and friends. I have even seen it in my own mirror.

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I believe that the self realization that someone can be a *better* person (by making the changes to not repeat the regrets of the past) is among the most noble things a person can do: *even if no one else is aware of the change*. Maybe even especially if no one pats us on the back.

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In my experience, there can be quite a time lag between when we realize that we have a regrettable character flaw and the point when we realize that we are prepared to do what is

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necessary to make the change.

Eventually, there comes a decision time.

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In life, we - occasionally - are blessed with time to gather information, to consider our options, to meticulously weigh the pros and cons.

Sometimes, time is *not* an ally.

There are situations when - if we are going to take a stand - the time to decide might be a hard deadline. It is possible to procrastinate so long that the opportunity is lost.

To paraphrase the old adage:

*the time will come when we have to
[pee] or get off the pot.*

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Who do people say that I am?

This question gave the disciples the option to consider the essential nature of Jesus from a distance. They did not have to own the answer themselves. They could be non-involved observers.

So, they shared the various rumours swirling around about Jesus: *they say you are a new John the Baptist; some even say that you are Elijah (or one of the other prophets) returned to life.*

But... who do you say that I am?

(crickets)

I have to believe that Jesus' close group of disciples, those who had chosen to reshape their lives to be with Jesus fulltime, had seen something special about him.

They had (each of them) - at some time - made the decision "to follow". And the nature of that decision could have been different for everyone. And, as the years went on, they may have reflected how their initial impressions were confirmed and how new experiences might have evolved what they *thought* about the carpenter-turned-preacher from Nazareth.

It was an internal conversation within the heart, mind and soul of the individual disciple.

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Then Jesus invited them to speak these internal conversations outloud.

Who do you say that I am?

Out of the silence, it is Simon Peter who voices what he has been thinking: *You are the Messiah!*

I wonder if any of the others were making this connection between their rabbi and a long-hoped-for god-anointed ruler for the people. "Messiah" - literally *anointed one* - brought to mind the kingdoms of David and Solomon from 1000 years earlier, when Israel was at the height of its regional influence. In Jesus' day, the dominant expectations of *messiah* involved on who would deliver the land from Roman rule.

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Peter took the risk and proclaimed the truth of what he believed and Jesus refuses to engage in any messiah talk. Instead, Jesus taught a wisdom of righteous suffering by using another old testament title, ben adam: *son of man*.

Son of Man is a humble title; one of vulnerability. Jesus spoke openly about suffering including rejection by those in power: such a significant rejection that it would lead to death.

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Even the promise of resurrection could not dampen Peter's disappointment at what he was hearing. Peter talked to Jesus privately about his concerns only to be told that his thinking was too limited: *You are setting your mind on human things. Get behind me on this one Peter and focus on divine things.*

I like how the planning resources in the "[Seasons of the Spirit](#)" curriculum puts it: *Jesus redefines both Messiah and disciple in this passage. To be a follower is not simply to name Jesus with a "correct" title ("you are the Messiah"). The text implies danger in the hard consequences of following in the way of Jesus, who announces suffering for self and crosses for disciples.*

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The *who am I* conversations between Jesus and his disciples in Mark 8 (and Matthew 16 and Luke 9) immediately precedes Peter and two other disciples sharing a memorable mountain top experience with Jesus which left them no doubt that there was something unique about Jesus' place in the long arc of faith. This then led up to the whole group eventually heading to Jerusalem for (what would turn out to be) their final Passover festival together.

The *who am I* conversations marked a decision time for those closest followers.

Were they prepared to following a suffering *son of man* with the same intensity as a victorious *messiah*?

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Choosing to follow a path to power and victory was certainly easier than remaining committed to a path that might contain rejection, suffering... even death.

In a phrase that must have meant more to the readers of Mark in the early 70s than it could have to the original disciples of the 30s, Mark reminds the church that *if anyone wants to become Jesus' followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow.*

Decision Time.

Pee or get off the pot.

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Making a choice to reverse the path of past regret might serve an ultimate good. It might allow us to evolve into better versions of ourselves, allowing us to serve a greater good in the end.

But... that choice may involve some hard and difficult aspects.

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When the Government of Canada and hierarchies of Churches that were involved in Indian Residential Schools were able to admit that generations of first nations peoples of this land were irreparably hurt as a result of the system designed to educate assimilation of indigenous cultures into the cultures imported into Canada from Europe.

In the times when these schools were set up and operated, the intent might have been viewed as noble and righteous. And for some of the students, the experience was positive.

But through the lens of understanding historical impact and overriding the loss of culture and identity and self worth can not be ignored.

Now, just because government and church leaders were able to do the self-evaluation necessary to see the value in formal apologies, agreeing to settle lawsuits and establishing and funding a massive [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) process (TRC) of storytelling and understanding, it does not mean that every citizen of Canada or every person in the pews are at the same place

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themselves.

And so, as a whole society, we continue to struggle. We wonder how much is enough? We have strong opinions (some of us) on the Victoria City Council's decision to put a statue of John A MacDonald in storage as a response to an evolving understanding of the history of the Indian Residential School system. Some might call it an ignoring of history; others a deeper historical understanding.

[I saw a Facebook meme recently that humorously invited people upset with Sir John A to send in all of their offensive \$10 bills with the first prime minister's picture. Of course, later this year, we will all be carrying newly designed \$10 notes featuring [Viola Desmond's](#) picture, so that meme will eventually become moot.]

Reconciliation (of any kind) takes time, because fixing what is broken, as best as possible, seldom happens without hard personal self-realizations.

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Non-indigenous Canadians don't need to wallow in guilt as a means seek reconciliation. The TRC did not encourage us to get stuck in the negativity... but to listen and learn together as the first step of charting a better future.

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I am thrilled that (this Friday), people of Leduc are afforded the opportunity to see and hear a story of reconciliation through the engaging theatrical mediums of music and dance as the [New Blood Dance Group](#) (from the Strathmore area) bring their acclaimed show to the Maclab.

This promises to be enjoyable and enlightening even if some of the source material is based on a hard story to hear.

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It was hard for Peter to begin to set his mind on divine things, when he had such grandiose human hopes for Jesus.

But Peter came around and was able to anchor the faith for a new generation of believers.

I have to believe that even through his inner struggles, Peter was at peace with who he became. Out of a deep love for the gospel, he fed and tended the sheep of Jesus' flock.

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Deciding to make ourselves or our world better is always a noble pursuit.

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The basic Christian gospel is that *in Jesus' wisdom, we find the path opened to finding our best selves.*

May God be with each of us, no matter what part of the path we each might be on.

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Let us pray:

God, you are patient and kind. Stand with us as we struggle with how to live out what we believe. Amen.

#308VU "Many and Great"

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