

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 AUGUST 2010

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Luke 13: 10-17

“Staying the Course”

1. Last year, in the second week of Easter 2009, I shared with you an anecdotal story about a congregation, in Amsterdam in 1952, which the Reformed Theologian Ernst Kasemann relates in his book *Jesus Means Freedom*.

One Sunday severe storms and floods endangered the lives of the members of the congregation. To survive they would have to go out and strengthen the dykes. But they refused! They believed they should honour the Sabbath and never work on a Sunday. The church council told the pastor that they must obey God's will, even if it meant death. God, being all-powerful, would save them. Their duty was obedience.

When the pastor suggested that Jesus himself broke the Sabbath on occasions, one venerable older man said that he had always suspected “that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal”. (16) Kasemann concludes that the “liberal” Jesus “was a cause of offence” to orthodox Jews, his first disciples and the whole church down to our time, due to his peculiar freedom. (17)

2. The leader of the Jewish congregation in our story in Luke 13: 1-17 holds the same interpretation as the Reformed Christian leaders in Amsterdam. He is indignant. He also believes Jesus is a liberal who has the wrong interpretation of Jewish Scriptures and practice.

As William Loader points out, here we have differing interpretations. The Jewish Law was important for Jesus, but the image of God who is behind this Law is even more crucial. It seems that for this leader of this congregation God expects humans to keep the commandments, no matter what their situation is. And behind this Loader suggests “is an image of God saying: I am God. I must be obeyed. I alone deserve your loyalty and service.”

(<http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost13.htm>)

William Loader leads us to see the subtle difference that informed Jesus' understanding of God with these comments:

What if God's chief concern is not to be obeyed, but something else? What if God's chief focus is love and care for people and for the creation? Then the focus moves from God's commands to God's people and world. It is as though God is telling us to get our priorities right. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are also subordinate to that purpose: love. God's focus is not self-aggrandisement as it is with so many who have power and wealth and want to keep it, but generosity and giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing.

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3. This is a good starting point, but we need to go deeper. We can have this view of God as loving and caring, yet still remain disempowered and anxious, and thus dependent on authority, rules, and safe and same structures that can produce a “spirit of weakness” for the vulnerable.

Not all Jewish leaders or Rabbis held such a rigid, defensive interpretation of the Law or of God. And this is where we start to deal with change, with noting anxiety and defensive structures and identities!

This leader represents leaders who are anxious to keep a system safe and the same as it has always been. A set of rules and guidelines, keeping things the same as they have always been, allows the illusion of feeling safe, secure, well-organised and well-ordered and keeps fear and anxiety subdued. They are leaders either desiring power and control, or are anxious about their own lives and seek to keep life ordered and controlled.

This story of the bent-over woman presents us with more than a historical situation. It is full of metaphors and images that both expose power and seek change and empowerment. The way leadership and the group have constructed their community has tragic effects on people like this woman. Not only her physical condition, but her spirit, identity, gender and value are affected. Jesus' response to the leader shows he sees and understands the larger picture, the complexity, and the immunity to change.

The leader's emotional response of indignation is evidence that power and the maintenance of his congregation and social and religious order are his main priorities. He sounds like Carnegie (Gary Oldman), the leader of a dysfunctional town in a post-apocalyptic America, in the movie, *The Book of Eli*:

I want the book (the bible) because I grew up with it I know its power... That's why they buried them all after the War. Building this town is an act of faith, but these people don't understand that! I don't have the right words to help them, but the book does... it provides the right words for why they are here and what they are doing, and they would not need their ugly motivations...

Later in private, he outlines his true intentions:

The book is a weapon aimed right to the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them...

Eli (Denzel Washington) who has the book and has been walking for years to find a place to leave it replies: "I always believed I'd find a place where this book belongs, where it is needed. I haven't found it yet...!"

When the woman appears in her condition during the service, Jesus recognises her oppression, stops his activity of teaching, addresses her as a person, and sets her free of her oppression. Jesus expresses in his behaviour his teaching that we heard a few weeks ago, God has pleasure in your good (Luke 12: 32). Then Jesus continues the theme from last week to express his burning passion for compassion and justice, the fire that divides, yet so as to free the oppressed. In his words Jesus reminds the members of the congregation that she is more than one of their livestock, whom they would rescue. He confers human dignity upon her, he stands for her. He provides language to expose oppression and invitation for a new way of being. As one New Testament commentator writes,

... it is probable that Jesus insists the woman is a daughter of Abraham because she has been robbed of her rights as a member of the covenant people, since she is identified as the bearer of an unclean spirit. Her physical position – bent over – can be taken as symbolic of her social position... (Tannehill, *Luke*, 218)

In this way, Jesus provides new language for a new way of being.

4. Luke's intentions in sharing such stories, in my reading, is to challenge his readers and congregations to follow Jesus' model of faith, values and behaviour. This is a form of challenging people and communities to engage in genuine developmental work.

To express it in our four-column map: To address: 1. our visible commitments, 2. our obstructive behaviours that work against our values and goals, 3. our hidden competing commitments, and 4. our hidden basic assumptions. (See [St Aidan's Sermon 15/08/10](#))

In our story, the leader seems to be expressing **column-one** values or commitments regarding what God wants. Yet these were contradicted by his **column-two** behaviour toward this woman, and also had **column-three** hidden competing commitments to place greater value on livestock than a needy human being. And of course, there is the unexpressed, unconscious **column-four**, his hidden big assumption, which is probably like Peter's, the CEO, from our case study last week: the need to control, to view himself as one who knows best, and thus lacking compassion for the one who is needy.

To avoid engaging in dialogue and becoming indignant and to then address the crowd for support as the leader did, signals his emotional anxiety and defensiveness. This usually signals deep inner anxiety about one's self. In the Enneagram, one particular personality style engages in **denial** as a defense mechanism whereby they unconsciously negate something that makes them feel anxious, vulnerable, or angry, such as unpleasant information or someone doing something unacceptable to their beliefs (Ginger Lapid-Bogda, *Bringing out the best in everyone you coach*, 189).

Conclusion

Our story is a call to "start and stay the course of doing genuinely developmental work" ... of "really, really wanting to accomplish his or her firstcolumn goal" (210), to use the language of Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey in their book, *Immunity to Change*.

But, Kegan and Lahey caution us, this goal must be a deeply felt "gut-level" urgency, that is, it is absolutely necessary, "that it is no longer tolerable not to address the goal"! Yes, part of this is to create a four-column map. But it must be fired by a gut-level passion, which means being "tapped into a bigger reservoir of desire to deal with [our] immunity to change" (211) as well.

In what fashion does Jesus begin his ministry? He preaches his first witness with a gut-passion announcing that he has come to engage in the process of releasing the captive, freeing the oppressed (4:18), and leading them to experience and live out of their new, integrated identity as a full human being, as one in whom God is pleased to bring about their good.

The developmental change for this woman now is similar to the one that was Ron's last week: how to enter a gut-level desire to move beyond his three columns: His boss is an abuser whom he seeks to please and accepts his diminishment: to move past the socialised mind, the self-authoring mind and living out of a self-transforming mind.

There's this love that is burning
Deep in my soul
Constantly yearning to get out of control

Wanting to fly higher and higher

I can't abide standing outside the fire.

Garth Brooks, *Standing outside the fire*.