



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Dr. Stephen Ward

Luke 13: 10-17

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“How Should We Speak With Each Other?”

Remember *Let the words of my mouth and
the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

My experience as a foreign reporter gave me an abiding interest in how people of different cultures understand and communicate with each other. Once, while reporting from Moscow, I attended a service at a Russian Orthodox church. I found a place to stand and crossed my arms. Soon, a scowling elderly woman stood in front of me and tugged on my arms, indicating that I should place my hands respectfully by my side. If I didn't know what to do with my *arms* in Russia, how much *more* did I not know about this culture?

In Belfast, I remember the first time I saw the brick wall – euphemistically called the Peace Line – that divides Catholics and Protestants strewn with hate-filled graffiti that glorified guns and violence. In Yugoslavia, I reported how Serbians, Croatians, Albanians, and others gave up on trying to live together peacefully. I came back to Canada with a deep appreciation of how important it is for people of different groups to seek shared values and common principles, and how crucial it is that they have a fair and effective process to discuss the issues that divide them.

This morning, I want to consider several ways that we as citizens of Canada should communicate amongst ourselves and across borders to enhance peace and justice, and what this means for journalism.

Now, most of us would agree that our world, divided among warring nations, conflicting ideologies and rival interests, needs better communication and understanding. Marshall McLuhan thought that new media transformed our world into a global village. But it is not like any cozy village that I know. Rather, it is a tense and radically plural world community, where people from different countries and traditions are brought into more frequent interaction through global economics and global communications. In such a world, *how* we speak to each other can have unexpected consequences. For an example, just think back two years to the global violence that erupted following the publication of the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed. So, the problem is: How can we engage in a respectful but frank manner with others, recognizing our differences but retaining our core values?

This morning, I have three problem areas in mind: First, there are those situations where we are

confronted by unjust practices. Second, there are situations where we disagree about what democracy requires. And third, there are situations where we seek to reduce tensions. I suggest that we need to use three different forms of communication for each of these situations. I call these forms of communication: speaking for justice, speaking for democracy, and speaking for solidarity.

Jesus and justice

Let me begin with speaking for justice. There are times when our aim is not to understand cultural practices but to oppose them. Let us not be naïve and think that supporting global peace and justice is easy, or a matter of warm and fuzzy feelings. Sometimes, we cannot remain silent about practices that we abhor, such as honour killings of women, or child slavery. In the reading from Luke, Jesus faces this type of situation as he heals a woman. Jesus must communicate in a hostile context. The leader of the synagogue accuses Jesus of breaking the law. Jesus makes it clear that what is right and good may violate laws that are arbitrary. But I don't think we should focus narrowly on the clever retort by Jesus that the laws themselves are inconsistent. There is a deeper point to be made. The laws are inconsistent because they reflect an unjust society. Religious ideology and power motivate the complaint against Jesus. Jesus is speaking in a context where women and others are scarcely citizens. They are literally speech-less. Remember, it is Jesus who sees the woman; she does not call out to him. This story reminds us that there are moments when we must speak firmly

against existing practices and against unequal systems of communication. Jesus opposed these systems throughout his life. He spoke from justice.

Origins of tolerance

Given that speaking from justice has offended the status quo, from Jesus onward, how did we develop from authoritarian societies to liberal nations with ideals of free speech and tolerance? The short answer is: **exhaustion**. But before that happened, religious zeal to save souls sanctioned war and inquisition; it justified colonialism as God's work among the "ignorant" and the "savage." For centuries, Western society assumed that one did not seek unity through plurality and discourse; rather one *enforced* unity by *silencing* plurality. As the Catholic theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet said in the 17th century: "I have the right to persecute you because I am right and you are wrong."

The idea of tolerance arose as a practical necessity, not as a high-minded ideal, only after European countries had slaughtered each other in the aftermath of the Reformation. But absolutism ended in havoc and exhausted countries. Gradually, it was grudgingly acknowledged that in a pluralistic society, peace requires liberty of religious conscience. Once this beachhead of religious liberty was secured, other liberties, such as political rights, would be insisted upon. Ironically, secular liberalism grew from religious roots.

At the same time, reformers argued that the basis of society was not the divine right of kings, but a social contract constructed by the people themselves. The liberal hope, never before envisaged, was that reasonable citizens, holding different views, could agree to a core of basic rights and deliberative institutions. What an ideal! That citizens could be ruled by reasonable agreement, not by the gun and the rack! This idea of contract also has a religious origin – the idea of covenant. In today’s reading, Jeremiah presents God as angry at the Israelites, who have not kept their contract but have pursued other gods and other goods. But it would take centuries before the idea of a covenant between God and humans could evolve into the idea of a political contract between ruler and citizens.

Speaking for democracy

This brings me to our second form of communication, speaking for democracy. The challenge of pluralism, the old problem of the 17th century, has returned in a new form. Today, one of great problems of liberal democracy is this: *How is it possible that there may exist a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable, though incompatible, religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?* On what common ground can citizens meet and deliberate? How should *our country* or *world at large* be organized so that it lives up to the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality? The only peaceful answer seems to be a form of democratic, public communication that is tolerant, informed, and based on

shared values. In other words, we must speak *for* and *from* democracy.

But what is the likelihood of such a dialogue today? I worry that we know and care too little about the values that sustain our democracies and our tolerance. I fear that much of the world is headed back to non-liberal forms of speech and society. Recently, I visited Singapore. I saw a country of law and order, and an efficient economy backed by global finance, undemocratic government, and compliant media. Is this a model for the developing world? Or consider the rise of fundamentalist groups who want to impose their laws on women, nay, on entire countries. Is this a return to 17th century absolutism?

How this society-wide dialogue on basic values should occur deserves a book, not a sermon. But here are four basic requirements: First, we need a fresh understanding of the principles that should guide the organization of institutions, the distribution of resources, the protection of the environment, and who has what rights and duties. Unless we can move toward a new inclusive agreement, or social contract, there will be little common ground for discussion. Second, we need citizens with democratic attitudes who see society as a joint venture for the common good, not as a means to personal achievement. Citizens should recognize what the philosopher John Rawls has called their “duty of civility,” speaking respectfully to others and restraining biases. Third, citizens need the education and opportunities to

develop their capacities and participate in the political process. Fourth, we need transparency of government through the media. Citizens need to know how decisions are reached and who is influencing the decision-making.

Therefore, to speak for democracy requires much – the right principles and attitudes, transparent institutions, sufficient resources, and an independent media. I will leave it to you to decide how close Canada approximates this ideal.

Speaking for solidarity

So far, I have explained speaking for justice and democracy. But what about the third form, speaking for solidarity? In this case, we use communication to cross cultural divides. Around the world, there are people practicing conflict-resolution, truth and reconciliation, and other techniques. They act as bridges over gulfs of mistrust and misunderstanding. I recently read about two professors, a Palestinian, Sami Adwan, and an Israeli, Dan Bar-On, who co-direct the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East or PRIME. The institute believes that much of the region's troubles are due to a disregard of opposing points of view. For years, PRIME has produced booklets for use in Palestinian and Israeli high schools to encourage each group to consider their region's many-sided history. The effort is not to legitimize the other's narrative, but to recognize other interpretations and experiences. PRIME's model has led to similar efforts by the Centre for Human

Rights in Macedonia, on Macedonian and Albanian narratives. The PRIME booklets have sold more than 23,000 copies in France where Muslim and non-Muslim tensions are evident. Their work has been translated into Spanish, English, German, Italian, Catalan, and Basque. American educators in Virginia and Philadelphia are looking at introducing the materials into classes on conflict resolution. Yet the two professors speak for solidarity under enormous pressure. During the Palestinian *intifada* of 2000, Bar-On and Adwan found themselves on opposite sides of an Israeli checkpoint near Bethlehem, begging soldiers to let them get a few yards closer so they could discuss their project. In 2004, the Israeli government threatened to discipline teachers who used the booklets they produced.

Journalism as public speech

Now, what does this mean for journalism? It means that journalism should facilitate these forms of communication. Journalism should not only care about *free* speech but also *democratic* speech, social justice and solidarity. Media should help public deliberation be set free from the influence of dominating concentrations of private and government power. *Newsweek* magazine recently had a front page story on how, for many years, big government and big money manipulated media and public opinion on climate change. Fine, but why was this not exposed long ago? As John Rawls writes: When money and power rule, "the political system is simply unable to function. Its deliberative powers are paralyzed."

Journalists speak for justice when they speak truth to power, represent the marginalized, and guard basic liberties. They speak for democracy when they ensure transparency. Moreover, journalists need to “go global”: to speak for justice around the world. They should act like anthropologists in helping cultures understand each other.

We must not fall into the trap of thinking that technology alone will address these issues. The Internet chips away at authoritarian structures, and aids democracy by adding voices to the public sphere. Millions of people blog, millions more share their lives on Facebook and YouTube. But a diversity of voices is not enough. Also important is the quality of the information exchanged, and the way people use the medium to speak to each other. The Internet is more than capable of circulating racism, child pornography, and terrorism. To say we have a technology with the *potential* to promote democracy is not to say that we are virtually assured of democracy. Along with a change in technology, we also have to change ourselves.

Are there journalists that speak in these three ways? Yes. Here, in our own congregation, we have Doug Todd of *The Vancouver Sun* who raises key questions about our values and ethics. Around the world, hundreds of journalists are killed and jailed every year for speaking truth to power. Based in Vancouver, journalist Ross Howard travels the world training journalists in conflict-resolution journalism. He gets journalists from

conflicting sides to work together so they can overcome their stereotypes. Recently on *Globe and Mail.com*, Howard mourned the fact that one of his trainees, Mahad Ahmed Elmi, was assassinated for his courageous journalism in Mogadishu. Unidentified men pumped bullets into Mahad’s head as he entered the studios of Captial FM where his talk show had enormous popularity for challenging human-rights abusers, warlords, and criminals. At least six other Somali journalists have died and another dozen have been wounded since June of 2006. Howard wrote: “My respect for media workers in those places is now boundless.”

Conclusion: Parallel virtues

In conclusion, I want to draw some parallels between a progressive citizen and a progressive Christian, or person of faith. Both the democratic citizen and progressive Christian speak for justice and peace, two primary values of this congregation. Both speak truth to power, as Jesus challenged the status quo of his day. Both seek the common good. Both fulfill their duty of civility by speaking to others in a respectful manner. By fulfilling our duty of civility, we don’t just express our commitment to tolerance. We also express our Christian belief in the dignity of every human being.

When we speak for justice, we may speak with a righteous anger; when we speak for democracy we debate more abstractly in terms of principles; when we speak for solidarity, we speak from the heart and from compassion. If people are

unwilling or unable to speak in these ways, the result will be the continuation of the sort of politics that feeds cynicism. We will see the usual horse-trading and the manipulation of media for special interests. At best, we will reach a temporary balance of forces. But we will not achieve enduring peace, or fair terms of social co-operation.

Unlike Augustine, I do not think of the world as divided between two cities – a holy city of God “up

there” and a corrupt city of Man “down here.” We should, while on this earth, act *both* as citizens of God and as citizens of earth-bound humanity. Our progressive democratic life *can* express the deepest values of progressive Christianity. If we combine these values, we have done what we can to make God’s love known, and to make this world a better place.

May it be so.