

CHANGING “ME” TO “WE”

Psalm 146; Mark 10: 35-45; 46-52

Craig and Marc Kielburger are brothers. When they were in middle school, over 20 years ago now, they went to Africa on a trip with other young people as part of an international educational experience. That experience totally changed their lives and the direction their lives would go. They saw poverty, need and exploitation in Africa. But they also witnessed the spirit of the people. What could happen if the right kind of support and opportunities were made available? What possibilities could there be if people were given the means to develop their own lives and build up their communities?

The brothers came back and knew they had to do something. They began by trying to enlist other youth back home, connecting them with global issues and social causes. Soon, they established partnerships with a growing number of schools to inspire ‘change-makers’ from within the classroom. Now, twenty years later, they have established a whole social enterprise called “ME to WE”. The enterprise raises money by selling products and travel experiences which then provide funds to their “WE” charity. The WE charity then sponsors projects all over the world.

The vision of ME to WE is this: To empower people to transform local and global communities by shifting from “me” thinking to “we” acting. Their mission is: To inspire and enable people to do good through their everyday choices. These choices include what people buy, how they spend and the choice of travel that leaves a positive footprint on the planet. Now, even though the enterprise and charity they run is dependent on money, the spiritual goal of the movement is to change thinking and behaviour. In a word, it’s about changing “me” thinking and behaving to “we” thinking and behaving. It’s about changing selfishness and self-focus to serving and empowering others. And in the process of becoming “we” thinkers and doers, people are transformed in their values and what they’re passionate about.

Well, this all sounds great in theory. And in fact, I think most people would love to be “we” thinkers and doers. But what’s the cost? And what are the obstacles to overcome? Well, at a very basic level, maybe we’re afraid of what we’ll be challenged to give up. How much of our own needs and wants will be set aside while the massive needs around us take over? It’s one thing to do our little bit here and there. But asking us to change our lives completely from Me to We? That’s a whole other undertaking and a whole other cost.

But maybe what we're lacking is some basic understanding. What if our inner resistance and hesitation is holding us back from experiencing a different kind of fulfillment, joy and even happiness? What if for all the needs, privileges and possessions we can accumulate for ourselves, we can never match the kind of abundance we can experience until we shift our thinking and behaving from Me to We in a decisive way? The question is: do we believe this? Do we believe that giving up Me in order to open up to We will really give us more than we can ever get any other way? Maybe many of us have already glimpsed that this is the case. Maybe many of us have already tasted what it's like to shift a little from Me to We and how good that has felt. So how do we keep shifting in a more decisive way?

Let's delve into our gospel reading for some inspiration and insight. The disciples of Jesus have signed up to follow Jesus because they care and because they believe Jesus is the messiah to lead their people into better days. But like many of us, a lot of their energy is also self-interested. And this self-interest shapes the expectations they have. Their self-interest shapes what they hear and what they resist hearing. Jesus has been telling them two key things. First of all, serving other people isn't easy and, in fact, serving others can be a thankless, draining and costly venture. Second, Jesus has also been telling them that serving means you start at the bottom, not at the top. To be a servant, especially in a world where there are slaves, means you don't look for promotions but for opportunities, opportunities to serve those most neglected, mistreated and dismissed in terms of their value and importance in society. This means that serving them and helping them won't get you much tangibly in terms of money or status or visible recognition. Meaning and fulfillment will have to come in a very different way.

And so, James and John are like many of us at heart. We're jockeying for things like status, security, recognition, money, appreciation and so many other things that are tangible markers of our personal value. And what does such competitiveness for position with Jesus do amongst them? It creates anger, resentment and mistrust. It erodes fellowship and unity. It undermines genuine love. And so, Jesus rebukes them: In the world, he says, those who are recognized as great, use their "ME" focus to draw privilege and service toward themselves. We see them and crave what they have for ourselves. But to become my followers in your thinking and doing, you need to understand this: I have come not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many. That is to say: I have come to give up my life so that others may be liberated and empowered through my living, serving and even dying should it come to that.

Wow, no wonder they don't want to understand what Jesus is saying!

And then there's a story that follows, a story about a healing. And this story following this account is quite intentional in the gospel. The blind beggar is named Bartimaeus. The fact that he's named means that he becomes an important witness of the kind of follower Jesus

is looking for. How? Well, at first, Bartimaeus seems just like so many who cry out to Jesus. They're looking for something for themselves. The needs are legitimate and real. Our needs are legitimate and real. Bartimaeus is blind. In a world before modern medicine and a world with no social Medicare, people suffered all kinds of ailments. Their only hope was in healers like Jesus. But here's the thing. Bartimaeus recognizes in Jesus something more than a healer ("Son of David", he calls Jesus, which is code for "Messiah Saviour"). Jesus is a spiritual transformer. Bartimaeus is awakened and empowered to be a healing agent himself, but also, through his faith, he is transformed to become a healing agent for others. He is transformed from "Me" to "We" in his seeing and this transforms his thinking and behaving. We're told that he gets up and immediately follows Jesus "on the way."

In time, of course, we know that James, John and the others also follow Bartimaeus' example. But it takes them longer than Bartimaeus, and that's with Jesus working on them over several years. It isn't easy shifting our thinking and behaving from ME to WE. Choices are difficult because it always involves a giving up as much as a taking up. We make space for others by getting rid of the obstacles in our lives. We make space to give and serve of ourselves only as we keep clearing out those things in ourselves that are all about us.

But let's get really real. What does it look like to shift from ME to WE in a concrete way? Let me end the sermon with two examples. First, it is remembrance day today. We remember all those of our nation who have given up the greatest thing they had – their lives. War is bad and it is sad, and it is tragic how many lives have been lost in the last 100 years and more. Even though there are political winners and losers in war, the loss of life on any one side is the biggest loss of all.

So why did our people go to war? Regardless of justifications or blame for war and regardless of what our personal views may be, those who served went out to serve not themselves but something beyond themselves. They had a vision of some greater good they were serving. They were serving a greater justice, a more sustainable long-term peace, a protection of the vulnerable, a rescue of the victims. Whether any war can provide all that is questionable. Yet they gave their lives because they shifted their thinking and behaving from ME to WE. And so we honour them and we want to be inspired to shift our thinking and behaving in how we live also.

Let me offer one final example, something a little lighter but also about the shift from ME to WE. Lu Wenzhen is the top official of a small village in rural China. The village is called Yugouliang. The village has fewer than 100 residents most of whom are farmers. Like many villages in rural China, Yugouliang has very few young people. Young people make their way to the cities and rarely return. The average age in rural villages is 65 and the future looks bleak. Many struggle with poverty and depression. But Lu wasn't about to give up on his village. He needed to find a way to bring some hope, some life, some purpose.

One day, two years ago, he watched a 60-year-old woman sit cross-legged for about half an hour on a large stone bed common in China's northern countryside. This gave him an idea. Yoga! Many in the village thought it was a crazy idea, so far away as they were from any of the gyms and studios of Shanghai or Beijing. Most in the village had never heard of yoga. Was Secretary Lu trying to introduce them into a cult? Lu himself had never done yoga before either. He didn't have the heart to tell them he had never taken a class. But through videos, photos and the internet, he learned yoga.

But then, he had to get the old farmers on board. That would be a task. So he bought gloves and mats to entice them. Initially, very few showed up to classes. Lu taught them how to breathe through a singing exercise. Then he tried to take them through some simple cross-legged moves. It didn't take long for more residents to join in, nor did it take them long to try more ambitious poses. After two years Lu felt confident enough to enter the village in a provincial competition. They won an award for being the best collective team in the whole province. Now Lu has even bigger plans. He wants to turn the village into a yoga training base for farmers from all over China, which, he says, will draw tourists as well. These are all dreams, of course, says Lu. But one has to have dreams."

And, we may add, one has to be changed from a ME to a WE thinker and doer to dream and act like Lu. One has to be motivated from a deeper passion to serve, anticipating the joy of seeing others flourish because we care. We have to become inspired by those who have served in time of war, giving up the ultimate sacrifice because they believed a better world was possible. We have to be inspired by Bartimaeus to be healed of our blind spots focussed on ME so that we can be liberated and empowered to follow Jesus into a greater WE way of life. And we need to learn from human beings like Marc and Craig Kielburger, that life's greatest riches are through those things we give away, not those things we accumulate.

"The Son of Man came not be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many..." Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." What about you and me? Amen.