

THE WISDOM OF THE RAVENS & LILIES

Luke 12: 22-34

"Life will get better"... Why could Linda hear this now but could not hear this when her neighbour told her the same thing the other day? Linda had been the victim of an abusive relationship. And even as she had worked many things out in herself with good therapy, the trauma of a day in and day out abusive relationship over several years could still get hold of her and bring her down. Would she ever be free and whole? Would life really get better? It's as if her neighbour had lost patience. "Time to move on Linda. Life will get better. Why can't you believe that?" Linda found herself feeling both shame that she could not move past this but also anger with her neighbour who had no clue what it was like to live what Linda had lived.

But then there was Aaliyah who was part of a support group Linda had joined. Aaliyah had been in an abusive marriage for 10 years and had nearly lost her life so badly was she beaten... She had got out and had spent years healing. Aaliyah also had a heart of gold, a compassion that oozed out of her eyes when she looked at you and spoke to you. "Life will get better, Linda," she said. And these very words spoken to Linda just a day after they had been spoken by her neighbour, sounded and felt totally different coming from Aaliyah. They were like balm to Linda's wounded soul. "Life will get better."

But can **we** believe this? What have we experienced in life? Who is the source telling us life will get better? Do they really understand what it's like to suffer and lose something or someone precious as has happened to us perhaps? Do they know what it's like to have to excavate your life in order to rebuild on a foundation deeper than the rot that has accumulated because of life's wounds?

Well, such questions are important for us to ponder not just for ourselves and those around us, but also on this Orange Shirt, Truth and Reconciliation Sunday. In order to earn the right to hope toward reconciliation and new life, we need to do the work of listening for truth and facing the truth. That can be, and for us Canadians is, painful. We can't claim the privilege of being Canadian with all the benefits that come with being Canadian, if we don't also take responsibility for how Canada got here. Whether we are first generation Canadian or several generations, we all carry the responsibility for how we treated first nations people who were here before us and stole what was theirs to have what we have. And the theft was not just material. We destroyed a civilization. How does that happen? Let me offer two brief ways into such a statement.

First the story of Orange Shirt Day which is also now Truth and Reconciliation Day is the story of a woman named Phyllis Webstad. Today Phyllis is a successful author and activist who has

received many honours from public institutions in Canada including the Governor General's Meritorious Service Cross - the highest of honours a Canadian can receive. And yet, Phyllis grew up impoverished, on a northern reserve in BC, raised by her grandmother. How many things had to go wrong for Phyllis to be living so precariously as a little girl? And yet, she claims, her life with her grandmother was also in community, with rich traditions of spirituality and caring.

But the government of Canada at the time did not believe so. Like most children, Phyllis was forced to go to a residential school, run by a Christian church, supported by government enforcement of the RCMP, so that her kindergarten years onwards were to be experienced away from home, taken into another world, stripped of everything that reminded her of who she was, including a richly coloured orange shirt she had bought with her grandmother to remember who she was and where she was from. Everything was taken from her never to be returned. Her hair was cut, she was forced to wear a drab coloured school uniform like other children, she was forbidden to speak her own language, and she was reminded repeatedly that she was dirty, she came from a flawed and backward culture and race, that anything she could hope for was a mercy, and through hard discipline and labour she was going to be made into a proper Canadian.

Well, as you can imagine, this did a lot of harm to little Phyllis. She grew up feeling worthless and flawed. She stepped into abusive relationships and substance abuse most notably alcohol. But somehow, in time, with a lot of support from others who had also been through her kind of suffering, Phyllis found her way from death to resurrection. The trauma is still with her. But caring for others and standing with her people demanding better from our governments, has also given her new life... Sadly, though, many beside her don't quite make it. Some have simply disappeared. Some have taken their own lives. Some have fallen so deeply into their shame and abuse that they have not been able to come out of it. The damage and the harm continue to be lived even as some, by the grace of God, have emerged out of the horror to stand up, serve, protest and rebuild their lives and their communities.

Here's another example. This past Thursday our book club gathered to discuss a book by award winning indigenous journalist Tanya Talaga, entitled: *The Knowing*. It is a difficult and painful read I have to admit, but also very important on many levels. Tanya chronicles her personal search for her family ancestry going back generations, and how the generations have been affected by the invasion of European settlers... From land grabs, theft, violence, abuse, forcing indigenous peoples off their land, confining their movements to reserves, contaminating them with foreign illnesses, taking the children, incarcerating them, plus other racist policies limiting what indigenous people can and cannot do... and all of it over time, with the intention in the words of a chief architect of the Residential School system: Duncan Campbell Scott - a Presbyterian - of "killing the Indian in the child." Either assimilate or die were the options given. Only now has the government of Canada and the churches admitted that what happened over

several hundred years with a series of policies and actions, was nothing less than genocidal... What's happening in Gaza over several decades and very ferociously right now, happened in Canada over several hundred years...

OK, so how do we then say: "Life will get better"? Can we say it? Do we have the right to say it? Can we say it to an indigenous person? Or can they say it to each other? Can they say it to us?... Life will get better. Really? How? Are there things we need to see for that to happen? Are there truths we need to face? Do we need to step outside our mindset and re-evaluate core ways we have lived and imagined our lives as Canadians?

To help us see truth but also hope, I'd like us to take a deeper dive into our gospel reading this morning. You know, even though many of us of a European, settler background believe we brought Christianity with us and needed to convert indigenous people to our faith, it may be that indigenous spirituality is actually much closer to the gospel of Jesus than anything we have read into it as settlers. How so? Our reading this morning will offer us a wonderful example if we open our heart and mind in a new way.

Our reading from Luke is another version of a similar teaching Jesus offers in Matthew. The difference, though, is that Luke's version emphasizes the connection between worry and greed. The more we want and feel we need, the more worry becomes a chronic part of our lives. Obviously we worry about many different things - from our families, children and parents, our friends and lovers, our health, our jobs, the world... but how is greed a cause of worry and what alternative ways of being are possible through some gospel wisdom?

Jesus tells us we should learn from the ravens and the lilies. What may they teach us? They teach us about true abundance to satisfy our needs, and true beauty that does not require effort and social comparison and competition. How so? The ravens have adapted their lives to their environment and they find an abundance of food to satisfy their needs. They live in an ecosystem where, sure, there is life and death, but there is a rhythm and seasons, where all creatures will take what they need and live side by side.

Likewise the lilies. In their case they grow through the natural processes of the earth with apparently little effort and show their beauty far greater than all the cosmetic, plastic surgical, fitness, and clothing industries combined can do to transform a human being with enough preoccupation and financial resources. How much of the marketing industry in our world is about making us feel inadequate, that we are missing that extra more to make our lives that much better? We need more stuff, we need to look good, and we need to have more than our neighbour. We are not ok as we are whether it's our body, our safety, what we know and don't know, where we've travelled, our house, car, friends and lovers... Dissatisfaction is the fuel of the marketing industry and it makes greed for more a real poison for our mother earth.

And think of our technologies. Everything we have created in the western world is over against mother nature and other creatures including human beings. It's about mastering, dominating and using other life to enhance our own comfort, pleasure and well being. It's not at all about living in some kind of adaptive harmony with the earth and the life in it.

OK, you may be thinking, but would we want to give up what we have? Would we want to live with less technology and more exposure to the elements, so to speak? Is there an alternative to our capitalistic mindset of growth and progress through more and better and greater? The one alternative system was communism and we got rid of that, and for good reason given the versions that existed. Well, yes, but we also got rid of other civilizations too, more indigenous civilizations with a very different relationship to mother nature.

When Europeans first came to the shores of North America, what did they encounter? The story we've been fed is that they encountered a civilization that was backward, caught up in strange customs and spiritualities, ignorant, primitive, without any sense of technology, commerce, property and civilization as we imagined was the pinnacle of our European world. But this is totally a false narrative we have been fed.

At the time there were hundreds of thousands of indigenous peoples and nations, living in a sophisticated network of alliances, treaties and arrangements within communities. Was there any conflict and discord, sure there was, but nothing of what Europe and the Western world has known. Was there any need, illness or struggle? Sure there was, but people also lived lives of abundance, medicinal knowledge, community and family. They aged well, their bodies and minds were strong, they had rich cultures of spirituality, religion, ceremonies for marking seasons of the year, rituals for birth, growth, transition and death, embracing diversity of sexuality and gender, and the gratitude for the abundance of mother nature. The earth and all creatures, not just humans, were persons, and rich relationships were formed with all life. Isn't this a wonderful way to live? Did they need technology as we know it? Did they need capitalism and money and our kind of clothing and stuff? Did they need guns and more sophisticated weapons?

Certainly they were not prepared to face the kind of violence and greed for more we brought with us, and they were wiped out in the face of it. Whether we tricked, outright took, or poisoned them into greed with their naivete, we destroyed an alternative civilization. Where your heart is, there your treasure is also, says Jesus, and we know where the heart of our western, European, North American civilization is, don't we. Greed is king.

OK, but can life get better? Will it get better? Are there ways we can learn from a more indigenous civilizational mindset as we move into an uncertain future as North American society and as individual persons and families? Can we simplify our lives, find abundance in who we are as we are and as we are becoming as persons in ourselves rather than what we possess?

Can we open our heart to curiosity and child-like learning rather than a we-know-best mentality that has shamed and destroyed all that is different than us? Can we minimize our craving for more so that our worry becomes less? Can we learn from the ravens and the lilies about true abundance? Can we admit that what was destroyed of indigenous civilization must now be adopted in creative ways so that life can truly become better for all of us? There is hope. But we must open our hearts and minds so that we learn from indigenous peoples who are seeking to recover what was lost for them too. That will serve genuine truth and reconciliation... What do you think?...

Amen.