

## **A New Tribe**

Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13 by Patty Friesen (Dec.4/16)

On this second Sunday of Advent, we hear the promise of the prophet Isaiah: the shoot from the stump of the tribe of Jesse becomes a tree for all people. And Paul's reflections in Romans 15 fleshes out that idea of a new tribe, that in Jesus, all people, Jews and Gentiles are brought together to make a new people who are not bound together by their nationality or economic status but are bound in a new life in the One who broke down barriers between us.

Journalist Sebastian Junger was hitchhiking across the US and was waiting for a ride outside a town in Wyoming when he saw a scruffy homeless man walking out from town towards him. Junger was on edge, thinking he would be robbed but the man came up to him and gave him a sandwich, probably from a local food bank and went back to town. Junger says, "I thought about that man for the rest of my trip. I thought about him for the rest of my life. He'd been generous, yes, but lots of people are generous; what made him different was that he'd taken responsibility for me. He'd spotted me from town and walked half a mile out on a highway to make sure I was okay. A tribe might be the people you feel compelled to share the last of your food with. For reasons I'll never know, the highway man decided to treat me like a member of his tribe." P. xvii

We learn from our First Nations neighbours, that belonging to a tribe is the most basic human need. The most startling fact about Canada is that it become a world power while butted up against an already existing civilization of First Nations people. Over the course of three centuries, Canada became a booming industrial society that was cleaved by class divisions and racial injustice but glued together by laws that theoretically at

least, saw all people as equal. The First Nations, on the other hand, lived communally in nomadic encampments that were more or less run by consensus and broadly egalitarian.

The proximity of these two cultures presented two ways of living and it may say something about human nature that a surprising number of white voyageurs ended up joining First nations rather than staying in their own society. They married Cree, were adopted by them, and on some occasions even fought alongside them. The opposite almost never happened: Cree people never ran away to join whites.

One of the most compelling aspects of native life might have been its fundamental egalitarianism. Personal property was usually limited to whatever could be transported by horse or on foot so gross inequalities of wealth were difficult to accumulate. Successful hunters and warriors could support multiple wives but unlike modern society, those advantages were generally not passed on through the generations. Social status came through hunting and war, which all men had access to and women had far more autonomy and bore fewer children than women in white society. Because of these basic freedoms, tribal members tended to be exceedingly loyal. Loyalty overrode all other virtues and the preservation of the tribe was a sacred task. Hoarding and selfishness was not tolerated and everyone was involved in childcare. The tribe raised your child and your child would have done almost everything in the company of others. They would have almost never been alone.

Which is the disaster of residential schools of course, in which First Nations children were taken from their tribes in order that they could be assimilated into our more civilized white society. But our civilized white society has been hard on us as whites also. First agriculture, then industry, changed two fundamental things about our human

experience. The accumulation of personal property allowed people to make more and more individualistic choices about their lives and those choices unavoidably diminished group efforts toward a common good. And as society modernized, people found themselves able to live independently from any communal group. A person living in Saskatoon can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day encountering complete strangers without any meaningful connection. We can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone.

The evidence that this is hard on us is overwhelming. Although happiness is notoriously subjective and difficult to measure, mental illness is not. Numerous cross-cultural studies have shown that modern society – despite its nearly miraculous advances in medicine, science and technology is afflicted with some of the highest rates of depression, schizophrenia, poor health, anxiety and chronic loneliness in history. Rather than buffering people from clinical depression, increased wealth in a society seems to foster it. (p. 17-19) By contrast, our Amish cousins have the lowest rates of depression. They value connection to each other and their heritage over extrinsic values of beauty, money and status in modern society.

The only time when North Americans felt less alone and more like they belonged was during WWI and WWII. Truly, war is the force that gives us meaning. It wasn't the violence that gave people meaning but the sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself – a purpose for one's life – to serve one's country in war. Current veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq struggle with re-entry into North American society because they don't know how they fit in or belong. They miss their platoons and the sense of brother/sisterhood in the face of danger. Nothing creates a bond more than

knowing you would risk your life for someone else and nothing replaces that sacrifice and bond back in civilian life.

This risk-taking is called the community of sufferers, community formed out of pain. And as pacifists we experienced the community of sufferers back in the Anabaptist days of martyrdom and in the Russian Revolution days of war and starvation and displacement. We experience this during WWI and WWII as conscientious objectors who didn't go to war, because we believed that we shouldn't and were sometimes persecuted by the rest of society. To be honest, I felt that bond of the community of sufferers during the drama after Matt and Craig's wedding here at church. We all got some of that push-back from neighbours and family members.

I caught some of this sense of the community formed through suffering during our Plow Wind Sunday. I had no idea of the extent of damage or the fear it caused for people here in Osler nor how bonded the community became through the cleanup. This is why for many people hardship turns out to be a great blessing and disasters like plow winds are remembered more clearly than weddings or tropical vacations. Humans don't mind hardship, in fact, we're at our best in the midst of hardship. What humans mind is not feeling necessary, not feeling like we belong to anything.

We pull together in hardship. Humans are strongly wired to help each other and enjoy enormous social benefits from doing so, which is why Mennonite Disaster Service is so hugely successful in bringing together people of different faiths and economic backgrounds. When you are working together on a site, you become a tribe – even if it is only for a week. I feel that when we work together at Friendship Inn – that we become a tribe even for a couple of hours and that the people we serve are also a part of that tribe.

That's the power and spiritual significance of service, of belonging to something bigger than ourselves and our own families.

Anthropologist Eleanor Leacock who spent a lot of time in northern Saskatchewan with Cree people relates a story about how she went on a hunting trip with a Cree friend named Thomas. Deep in the bush, they encountered two men, strangers who had run out of food and were extremely hungry. Thomas gave them all his flour and lard, despite the fact that he would have to cut his own trip short as a result. When Eleanor probed Thomas as to why he did this, he finally lost patience with her, saying, "If I don't give them food, I'll be dead inside."

Sebastian Junger reflects that this was the answer why that homeless man gave him his sandwich on the highway 30 years ago, because poor as he was, the homeless man refused to be dead inside.

This is why Jesus calls us to share food, and gives us the Lord's Supper, to call us into our best selves, to remind us that we need to be together and we need to share food. Jesus knew that communion would be the force that would give Christians meaning, as well as potlucks. We need to belong and we need to serve each other and Jesus gives us the reason to do that.

Let us pray... Thank you Jesus for calling us beyond ourselves into deeper connection and meaning with you and the new tribe you are creating. Help us to find these ties that bind and bless us this Advent season. Amen.