

May 6, 2018 “The Healers, the Justice Seekers, and the Reconciler”**By Heather Peters** for Osler Mennonite Church

Acts 5:12-41

I am currently serve as the Peacebuilding Coordinator for MCCA. For those of you who pay close attention to MCC and what we do and who is doing what may know that since 2012 I have worked as the Restorative Justice coordinator for MCC. About a year ago we re-visioned this role because of new realities within our work and constituency. Under the peacebuilding umbrella at MCC in Saskatchewan we are working in three different areas: trauma awareness, restorative justice, and reconciliation. We believe that to build peace in our communities we need to address the harms that have happened through trauma education; we need to seek positive ways forward through restorative justice; and we need to work at creating hope-filled relationships through the reconciliation movement. This broader mandate within MCCA has given me a full and fulfilling year – I’ve provided trauma trainings to MCC staff and partners such as Mennonite Disaster Service, Open Door, and Elizabeth Fry Society, I have co-facilitated Grief and Loss workshops within the Saskatoon Correctional Centre, MCC has conducted numerous Blanket Exercise experiences, which looks at Canadian history from an Indigenous viewpoint, in schools, community groups, and local non-profit organizations (YWCA), MCC sits on the Reconciliation Saskatoon working group, which includes over 60 other organizations who are trying to figure out how their work can promote reconciliation, and at MCC, we continue to fund and provide capacity building for CoSA SS in Regina, Micah Mission in Saskatoon, and Parkland Restorative Justice in Prince Albert who all provide restorative justice based programs like P2P (prison visitation) and Circles of Support and Accountability for people coming out of prison. In partnership with Micah Mission we are also developing a 6-session restorative justice course that will be held in the Saskatoon Correctional Centre and we are currently looking for volunteers who would be willing to come help with the facilitation of that program.

Ok, so you probably didn't ask me here to provide an annual report of my work, but we are finishing the end-of-fiscal-year requirements with final written reports and presentations for the MCC board. I really couldn't help myself by providing an activity-based synopsis. Also, this is a form of accountability. As a church that supports MCC's work (thank you so very much for everything you do to provide this support) MCC/I want you to know what we are doing. I also wanted to give you an overview of my work because of its application with biblical story from today.

So, in our story from Acts we have three main players – the apostles, the Sadducees, and the Pharisee Gamaliel. I'm going to now make some broad generalizations about each group to help move along this sermon. First the **Apostles** – they were part of an exciting new movement, they were speaking against the traditional authority figures and injustices within the society, they weren't afraid of the consequences of these actions – such as going to jail (they may have believed these experiences were necessary since vs 41 says, “they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.”) – they were also respected by the people for their teachings, and they were healing people. The **Sadducees** were a central part of the traditional authority structure – the governing body of Israel. As a group they were liberal and did not believe in the supernatural. So, something like the resurrection and stories of angels may have made them roll their eyes. In this story we see that their actions were not always entirely strategic as they were often reacting with their emotions. Finally, Gamaliel, the **Pharisee**. The Pharisees were more conservative and orthodox is their theology. They did believe in the resurrection and angels. The Pharisees had joined the Sadducees to form a coalition group to govern Israel so when Gamaliel said he had advice on how to deal with the Apostles, the high priest and elders listened to him. Gamaliel was a respected teacher of the law.

The Apostle healers, the Sadducee justice seekers, and the Pharisee reconciler.

Trauma healing, restorative justice and reconciliation.

All these parts are needed to keep the story, our stories, our lives, moving forward.

Let's see how we can connect these pieces.

The **Apostle healers** – like Jesus they were performing signs and wonders, they held sessions that involved teachings and prayers, and they felt committed to follow a higher authority than that of the State (a key Anabaptist value!). I was drawn to verse 15, “so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.” First, this highlights the great faith that people had in this movement and the hope that this would help them feel better. It also brought people together. To gather on the streets to wait, to visit, to hear other people’s stories, to try to figure out what this was all about. And there can be some healing power in this part as well.

A few months ago, I was sitting in the Saskatoon Correctional Centre with 2 people from the Catholic Diocese who I was co-facilitating with and 9 men who were serving time. We were all crying. This was part of a 4-day Grief and Loss workshop where the men voluntarily came to talk, draw, sculpt and write about a loss they had experienced. The course is created to engage both the right and left hemispheres of the brain so there is lots of time of self-reflection during art projects and writing times, but crucially, there are opportunities to share this self-reflection with others. We work at transforming and letting go of some of the deep, dark emotions through affirmation and acknowledging we have all been in these places as well. One time during a workshop a man took a piece of clay to sculpt an image of the grief he was carrying. It was a noose – representing the death of a friend who had killed himself. As facilitators we knew that we were going to ask the men to transform this clay at the end of the workshop into something beautiful and we were unsure how this noose could be transformed. But he did transform it in the most beautiful, life-giving way. He took it and turned it around, so the rope was now on the bottom and the loop on the top. He painted the top part green and the bottom brown – he had transformed this tool of death into new life – a bright, vibrant leaf.

But this isn’t what we were all crying about.

I was crying with a different group of men who had come together in a small room at the correctional centre and through the exercises and reflections had created a sacred space of safety and trust that I have never experienced before in that setting. In this space they were talking about experiences they had never shared before in their lives to anyone – stories of

abuse and neglect and poor coping skills that led to dire circumstances. They were hard stories to hear. But they were necessary stories for the men to share. It was part of their transformation internally, being able to say these experiences out loud and not hold them in anymore. One of the men later said, "I feel way better now, my mind is joyful and clear, and I am not afraid to cry anymore", another said, "Without the support of the group I would never have been able to open up", and another, "I now recognize the strength of letting go of my shame." In these groups I am realizing the power of sitting together in a circle, knowing that my pain is not much different than the pain of the person beside me, and having hope of transformation.

This doesn't happen all the time. And I'm sure it didn't happen all the time as people waited on the streets to see and hear the Apostles. But when it does, when we can come together in vulnerability and trust, it is amazing and healing.

The **Sadducee justice seekers** – clearly we want to make these ones the bad guys of the story. They were trying to stop the message of Jesus brought by the Apostles. They also wanted to kill the Apostles, so that is a rather large strike against them. But we can learn some things from their place in this story as well (also my work in restorative justice has taught me many times over that there aren't bad people/bad guys, just people who can do harmful things). The Sadducees were trying to seek justice – they wanted to make things right. And in their position, this meant keeping things the same – status quo. The idea of a group coming in and getting people to question authority and allegiance was definitely meant to shake things up – and according to the Sadducees, it was just wrong! In this story the Sadducees are full of emotions. We see that they are jealous, perplexed, afraid, and enraged! These are strong emotions and ones that often lead to actions that may be regrettable in the future. How often have we done or said something in anger only to realize we have just made the situation we are angry about so much worse? So, I think that when Gamaliel stood up to speak he did so at just the right time. It allowed the rest of the council to give thought to the situation beyond their emotions. And it shows us the importance of listening in discerning future actions.

One of the groups M CCS supports holds book studies in the Women's Correctional Centre in Prince Albert. They go weekly for about 6 weeks to build relationships with the women and to talk about what the women's futures might look like as they plan to leave the institution. The population at this correctional centre often has more than 90% Indigenous women. In the group's report at the end of their fall session they wrote:

We found ourselves in the midst of an incredible reconciliation/forgiveness experience where I was able to apologize to them on behalf of the church for the wrongs that they had experience from the church in the past. This was incredibly meaningful for some in the group who had not been able to get over the church's role in the loss of their cultural heritage and the abuse that they experienced. This opened space for me to ask the women, "if you could tell the church anything, what would you want to say to them." A few of their comments were targeted toward a particular denomination, but there were 7 things that were said that fit for all churches that I feel are very profound.

(An aside: I wasn't part of these groups so I can't necessarily expand on the 7 points that I am about to tell you, but I just invite you, as a church, to listen to what these women in prison want to say to you:)

1. Live by what you teach
2. Admit that you participated in cultural genocide - that the aboriginal people's story is part of your history.
3. Acknowledge that it's not wrong to believe in the Creator
4. All the churches should be ONE - and not have different rules
5. Be welcoming, accepting, non-judgemental
6. Offer free counseling and free treatment - not more apologies and money
7. Forgive yourselves

If we are seeking justice to right a wrong or many wrongs, let's listen to those who have been harmed.

Finally, **Gamaliel** – I like this guy! He approached this situation with a wide perspective and a faithful heart. Gamaliel asked that the Apostles be put outside for a short time. This allowed the people of the council to calm down and think and process the next steps using a rational process rather than an emotional process. Gamaliel then presented a few case studies, as it were, of similar situations in the recent past of other movements. He mentioned how the longevity of the movements had failed. He suggested that the Sadducees ignore the Apostles, like you might ignore someone who is behaving in a way to just get attention, and that if the movement was of human origin it would fail. But if it was of God – then they would not be able to be overthrown, no matter what! This type of advice has become known as The Gamaliel Principle.

Ok, so most biblical commentators don't love Gamaliel. A minority of commentators see his advice as positive. A few see it as a mixture of truth and falsehood, and others see it wholly in a negative light. This is fair – there are questionable and even evil things that happen and are justified as being blessed by God because they simply weren't stopped. The final advice is not why I like Gamaliel. What I did like is that he took time, he created space, and he analyzed the situation. Some commentators say this was a politically shrewd move, but I also think it is a good way to handle conflict.

And while I don't necessarily agree with the "let's see if God will let this happen" approach, this story did remind me of the Thomas Merton prayer Joel and I have up in our house, where he takes this idea of the Gamaliel Principle and gives it a bit of a twist. It goes like this:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

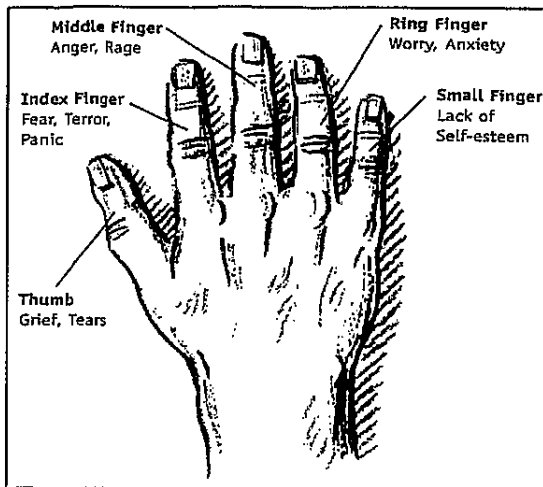
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Usually when I come to this prayer I am seeking guidance in an unclear and difficult time. I really don't know what the future will look like and I am praying that things will become clear. I often pray this as a form of lament. But as I read through this prayer the other day I suddenly saw it as a prayer of thankfulness. I can be thankful that even though I do not know the road ahead that God is still with me. God is also with the men and women in prison who are struggling with their dark pasts and unknown futures. God is with the people who choose to come and walk along with people in loss, in making things right, and in hope.

God is with you. Perhaps God is calling you, although you do not know it yet, to come volunteer with people in prison, to people who are suffering, to people in conflict. Who is God calling you to be? The one who heals, the one who listens for justice, or the one who reconciles?

Since I have mentioned emotions several times today I wanted to finish by taking you through a common tool I use in trauma awareness classes to manage strong emotions called the

Fingerhold Meditation. It can be used when strong emotions are keeping you in negative space. I was taught this tool by a doctor who worked in Rwanda during the genocide and used this on her patients. When they used the fingerhold technique of processing their emotions they were able to sleep better and took less pain medication. The technique is simple and based on a Japanese healing practice that uses gentle and direct pressure on our fingers. Each finger is connected to a strong emotion.



Fingerholds Explanation

Because there are energetic pathways that run through the fingers (referred to as meridians), each of these 'attitudes' can be balanced by simply holding the corresponding finger, thereby harmonizing the entire circulation of energy in our bodies. They are based in a form of acupressure called Jin Shin Jyutsu.

Jin Shin Jyutsu® physio-philosophy is an ancient art of harmonizing the life energy in

the body. Born of innate wisdom and passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, the Art had fallen into relative obscurity when it was dramatically revived in the early 1900's by Master Jiro Murai in Japan

What is Jin Shin Jyutsu?

Jin Shin Jyutsu is a Japanese healing practice that uses gentle, direct pressure of the hands or fingers along energy pathways on the body to promote health and wellbeing: The philosophy behind "Jin Shin" is that it works by redistributing and unblocking energy by applying pressure to 26 specific "safety energy locks" along the acupuncture meridians, or "energy lines" of the body. Holding these locks in combination balances the body and mind and facilitates a deep sense of relaxation.

What are the benefits of Jin Shin Jyutsu?

Jin Shin Jyutsu reduces stress and tension, eliminates chronic pain, increases self-awareness and promotes the natural healing abilities of the body.

For research studies

see <http://www.isjinc.net/pagedetails.php?id=StudiesandResearch&ms=8>

Handwritten note:
Close your eyes

Fingerhold Meditation for Groups

(Adapted from *Capacitar for Kids* by Elaine Zook Barge)

Close your eyes and breathe deeply, feeling your feet connected to the earth.

As we go through the finger hold meditation, you can use your breath to release any negative feelings. And, as you breathe in, inhale the energy of nature to bring peace and healing into your body, mind and spirit.

Start by taking hold of your thumb. This is the finger for tears, grief and emotional pain. As you hold your thumb, recall any feelings of sadness or tears that you may have

within you. Breathe deeply and exhale tears and grief. Breathe in peace and strength; transforming your sadness into wisdom to guide your life.

- *God will be our God. God will wipe away tears from our eyes: there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. Rev. 21:4.*
(After a few minutes of quiet) Take a moment more with your thumb, knowing that you can always return to work more with these feelings. When you are ready, you can move to the index finger.

This is the finger for fear, terror and panic. As you hold your index finger, recall any feelings of panic or fear or memories of terror that you may have within you. Breathe deeply and exhale fear and panic; breathe in courage, strength and wisdom to work with your fears and make wise choices.

- *In 20:19 - In the evening, the doors were closed where the disciples were for fear of the Jews. Jesus came... and said: Peace be with you.*
(After a few minutes of quiet) Take a moment more with your index finger, knowing that you can always return to work more with these feelings. When you are ready, you can move to the middle finger.

This is the finger for anger, rage and resentment. As you hold your middle finger, recall the anger, rage and resentment you carry within you. Breathe deeply and exhale anger and rage; breathe in peace and energy, transforming your anger into wisdom, passion and action to guide your life.

- *Eph 4:26 Even if you are angry, do not sin: never let the sun set on your anger. Do not give the devil his opportunity.*
(After a few minutes of quiet) Take a moment more with your middle finger, knowing that you can always return to work more with these feelings. When you are ready, you can move to the ring finger.

This is the finger for worry, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. As you hold your ring finger, recall any feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed that you may have within you. Breathe deeply; exhale worry and anxiety, letting go of all the unnecessary burdens you can't do anything about. Breathe in strength to carry your responsibilities lightly, doing what you need to do in life with peace/wisdom.

- *Is. 41:10 - Stop being anxious for I am your God, I give you strength, I bring you help.*
(After a few minutes of quiet) Take a moment more with your ring finger, knowing that you can always return to work more with these feelings. When you are ready, you can move to the little finger.

This is the finger for lack of self-esteem, when you feel small or like a victim of life. As you hold your finger, recall any feelings of unworthiness or negative self-talk that you may have with you – messages that come from family, peers and society or life experience. Breathe deeply; exhale these negative feelings; breathe in strength, self-acceptance and gratitude for life.

- *Is. 43:1,4 - I have created you, formed you... You are precious in my eyes, I honour and love you.*
(After a few minutes of quiet) Break deeply and slowly open your eyes. Take a moment to look at your hands and recognize the gift of your life.