

“The Moral Compass”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, October 4, 2020

Exodus 20:1-17

It’s hard to ignore what’s happening south of the border. Watching the presidential election debate last Tuesday was probably one of the most alarming debates I’ve ever witnessed. It wasn’t the bullying or the talking over – that happens enough in Canadian televised political debates. It was the number of moments when the leader of the United States undermined the democratic values that we share here in Canada. Asked if he would be able to commit to a peaceful transition of power, Trump said, “That depends on whether I like what I see.” Asked to denounce White Supremacy, instead he told white supremacist groups to “Stand back and stand by’. Within an hour, white supremacists all over the United States and Canada had created buttons and patches to sew on their jackets with the words ‘Stand back and Stand by’.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night because the leader of the ‘free world’ would not accept a peaceful transition of power if he loses. Where is the moral compass? What is happening to the democratic values that ensure justice and equality, values that are enshrined in constitutions that are at the heart of the moral fabric of our countries?

I have been formed by values that my parents instilled in me. I have also been formed by values I learned in the church, values that help me to know right from wrong, that help me to know the difference between justice and injustice. Through the example of the church, people and communities learn what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. Through the example of the church, people learn what it means to use your voice to call out injustice, to speak for those whose voice is effectively silenced.

Historically the church has been an integral part of society. Canadian church historian Brian Clarke writes, “The Catholic Church and Canada’s largest Protestant denominations were part and parcel of the country’s cultural fabric. They were once the custodians of the nation’s conscience and the arbiters of its values, and they held that position because it was widely assumed that Canadian society, its culture and its social institutions, were Christian ... Their norms were embedded in Canadian law, and a wide array of social institutions, such as those relating to health, welfare, and education, socialized Canadians into their values and world view.”¹

For a long time, Christianity was a major part of the social fabric of society. Listen to this description of Canada Day on Parliament Hill, Ottawa in 1967. “Eight clergy sat on the dais, including the moderator of the United Church, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Quebec, and the Anglican bishop of Rupert’s Land, with only a rabbi among them to represent non-Christian religious traditions. With the exception of the Centennial Hymn and “O Canada,” all the songs were Christian hymns or anthems. The crowd joined in reciting the Lord’s Prayer, Primer

¹ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 234.

Minister Pearson read from 1 Peter (3:8-18, that the righteous are blessed by God), Cardinal Roy invoked Christ's name in prayer, and the service concluded with a benediction."²

However, things were changing. Clarke writes, "The United Church, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran churches, and the Baptist churches – were vibrant institutions in the 1950s. They were recruiting new members and, what is more, successfully socializing the children and youth of their members. Then, very suddenly, many baby boomers – notably among the younger members of that generation born after the mid 1950s – dropped out of church, not to return even when they started having children."³

The baby boomers left the church in droves, and took their kids with them, and none of them came back. Consequently, decades later there are a lot of young people out there who have never darkened the door of church and don't know why they would. A documented 'loss of religious memory'⁴ is a reality. These children of the baby boomers have no idea what a church is for. And we can't hold our breath hoping they'll find us.

The Ten Commandments are about relationship – our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. We're supposed to be nice to our parents. We're not to hurt others or want other people's stuff. When we commit ourselves to another person, we're supposed to stay committed to that person. Some think of these commandments as rules that must be obeyed, and if they're broken, God help you. But others see them as rules given to help lead and instruct and guide us as we move through life, learning by our mistakes, and picked up by God when we fall in a hole of our own making.

Things like the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer *informed* our culture. They told us how to behave; they told us what our daily conduct should be. I have a decades old framed picture of the Lord's Prayer and below it are the Ten Commandments. These were in peoples' homes, in churches, maybe in the schools. They were our compass.

The church has always been in a position to speak truth to power. That is what Jesus did. He said that the first will be last and the last will be first. He turned the social order upside down. In his parables, in his words, in what he did with the people he met, he continually lifted the lowly and brought down the mighty. He challenged the authority figures. He exposed fault lines. He healed those the world had forgotten. He gave new life to those who had lost hope.

Jesus *is* our living compass.

Clearly and resolutely, the church has been the conduit through which generations have learned Christian values that are based on the scriptures and the example of Jesus Christ. What the fiasco of the American debating match showed me was that these values are slipping. Values of the Kingdom of God – values that ensure equality, inclusion, and justice. Values that welcome all to the table. "And there are no exceptions."⁵

² *Leaving Christianity*, 216.

³ *Leaving Christianity*, 197.

⁴ *Leaving Christianity*, 209.

⁵ Nichole Nordeman, lyrics from "Dear Me"

Will the biblical values of justice prevail in a world where the church is losing its stance? Do the values of the God's kingdom still find resonance among a people who have forgotten or don't know them?

Our calling as Christians is to do what we have been taught all our lives. To follow the ways of Jesus, to seek justice, to serve others, and to walk humbly with God. The world is hurting badly. As Christians, we have an idea of how the moral compass works, that it points to justice, not injustice, that it points to healing, not destruction, that it points to love, not hatred.

While the stats and the numbers tell us that the institution of the church is failing in a post-Christendom context, God isn't finished with the church. The scriptures hold our teaching. Jesus is the compass. The church has you. The church has me. And together, the church is very much alive when we keep that compass in our hand.

For the compass leads us to love.

And love will *always* lead us to justice and equality.

Thanks be to God. Amen.