

Eyes to See and Admit Communal Sin

Exodus 32:7-14; Jonah 3:1-9; Mt 13:13-17

How often have you had this kind of experience? You haven't noticed the car you own as you drive around, until you purchased your car? For example, I could not tell you what a Buick Century was, until I bought one. Then I noticed them all over the place. And I still notice them, even though they have been discontinued. Why? It was a good used car, until my daughter managed to total it. My family knows what I mean when I exclaim when we are on the road, "That's my car!"

All of us go through life with various kinds of blinders on. Hunters will see things to shoot – and many of us don't even know they are there. Farmers can look at a field and make a pretty good guess as to its quality – but most others don't even know what crop it is. All of us see things because of training, interest and our experiences that many others don't see.

I think that so much of the unrest in the world, is partly because "the system" – isn't working well for the majority of common citizens. So citizens are reacting. But the main news media and powerful rich don't seem to really understand this growing anger around the world as the income and wealth disparity is increasing.

My son said something months before the US election that has stuck with me. He said, "Americans are so angry that they are willing to cut off their arms to make a statement." This I think is as good as any explanation as to why Trump still has significant popularity. He's thumbing his nose at the establishment.

Can we see this is self defeating? But we see this anger and unrest with Brexit, Hong Kong, the yellow vests in France, and now Indonesia - just to name a few places. Leaders don't "see" as they try to hang on to power and privilege.

How often after an event – good or bad, have we realized we have been clueless? We didn't

see it coming! We find this same problem of not seeing in the Bible with spiritual issues.

Many OT prophets like Jeremiah made this observation. "Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, Who have eyes but do not see; Who have ears but do not hear." (5:21)

Jesus often made this same observation like when he talked about the **parable of the sower**. (Mt 13:13 - 17) "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. For this people's heart has become calloused. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear."

So why would we expect ourselves to be any different? Let's consider this Biblical theme of not seeing and why we so often don't.

I think that being smart is knowing that I don't know and then trying to figure out what I'm not seeing. It's questioning & learning. Intelligence has been defined in many ways, including: the capacity for logic, understanding, emotional knowledge, self-awareness, learning, reasoning, planning, critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. More generally, it can be described as the ability to perceive or infer information, and to retain it as knowledge to be applied towards adaptive behaviors within a context or environment. It's the ability to pull various random facts together to alert us to consider ideas outside our normal range of thinking.

So why do we so often not see what is right in front of us? For example it should not have taken so long for everyone in the medical establishment, government oversight agencies, the media, and even community leaders, to connect the dots around overdose deaths. Either they saw it and ignored it for profits or feared disturbing the status quo, or had blinders on.

Another current day dynamic is history tells us we cannot win the war in Afghanistan. Great Britain has tried four times to exert control or influence since 1839, to extend its empire and to counter Russian influence, with limited

success. We know the failure of the Soviets to conquer Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.

So you would think that currently, after 18 years of war, we would admit this is a no win situation? Hopefully government people would finally realize, that killing more natives, just causes more people to choose sides against the west. The recent drone killing of 30 farmers, resting together after a day of work, didn't even make the major news outlets, this is so common now. In the US presidential elections, the one candidate, a military person, who talks frequently about the futility of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is put down and sidelined by the media and even her own political party.

Euronews recently reported that pro-government forces, including NATO allies, caused more civilian deaths in Afghanistan than insurgents in the first half of 2019, a new UN report said. But it seems the western military industrial complex is so powerful that we increase our debt, & destroy lives – including those of our own, to feed the war machine and create jobs – above all common sense.

I bring this up simply as an example of – can we see what is in front of us? Or does pride, the national defense idolatry and jobs, keep us stuck into an evil solution? I'm glad Canada chose to take it's military out of Afghanistan in 2014.

Since we have been looking at sin, we should broaden our focus to understand that sins touch both individuals & communities. Let's acknowledge that the church and society has a problem recognizing there is communal sin. Let's read the Bible with the eyes of a group. We have learned to read it as addressing individuals, and it does. But notice how often the language is plural. It understands that sin affects the community and not just individuals. And sin does not just have a one time effect on people. The effects of some sins go on for generations. So societies and cultures are called to account for sin. And we have to rejoice that many of the promises in the Bible are plural.

There is scarcely anything a Western Christian will resist more than the pointing out of communal sin. To acknowledge community sin cuts against the fierce individualism of Western cultural thought. To think that I am tied up in sins of my society that I may have never consciously chosen or that I may be unconsciously committing, and may benefit from, suggests I do not direct my own destiny. This is a terrifying thought, for the rugged individuality of the self is core to a Westerner's very identity. But we must ask ourselves, as followers of Jesus, are we blinded because we only read the Bible through the lens of Western thinking patterns? And our own biases?

Jonah has to be one of the strangest books of the Bible and not just because of the whale. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire to tell that in 40 days, (note the number 40 again), God would overthrow them. But, "the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning, from the greatest of them to the least of them." (3:5) The Assyrian king issued a decree to repent, and said, "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger so that we not perish." (3:7-9)

The Assyrians for some reason – took Jonah's warning seriously. They listened. And acted. They took ownership of their evilness as an empire, a culture and a people. They saw. This story illustrates a great truth. Repentance is not just only for individuals. Sometimes it's necessary for entire communities and even nations. Even a gentile king figured this out.

Each of us does things we should not do, but also all of us together do things we should not do. In communal sins some people are more guilty than others, but all are guilty to some degree, even children and infants. Their innocence does not erase the stain of sin. Its how original sin works without people being personally involved in any of the grievous errors. As we struggle with this idea, we must ask – what is the Jonah story trying to teach us?

Congregations get good or bad reputations. I've pastored in both kinds. And when the stories were bad – part of our work was to encourage the members to acknowledge that they should have acted and thought different. For example I read about one church that had 7 pastors in 5 years. So they wrote a letter to their denomination seminary accusing them of not producing good pastors. They refused to see – that they were the problem!

So when I come across this story – it gets my attention and warms my heart. A **church in Indiana** engaged in an amazing act of communal repentance. For decades they had chewed up every pastor they had. In situations like this it's usually a small group of miscreants who keep acting badly, and the congregation allows it – time and again. But the spiritual and reputational health of the congregation is badly affected. So the leaders of this congregation, led the members in owning their history.

They called for a service of confession and reconciliation. As part of it, the current pastor on behalf of the whole congregation, washed the feet of all the former pastors. I suspect they did more than just this one worship event in examining – seeing themselves, and this was part of an ongoing process of facing their individual and collective guilt. This is a good example of communal repentance at its best. Hopefully this has moved that church out of bad old habits; they can stop each other from sin; and improve their congregational witness.

Let's look at the **golden calf** story. When Moses went up Mt. Sinai for 40 days, another number 40, to be with God, what did the people do? They got impatient, melted their jewelry, and created a golden calf to worship. They said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us."

This seemed to be a collective effort by every one. It takes a lot of gold jewelry from a lot of people to make a golden calf. The calf or bull was the symbol of pagan Canaanite religion. Of course God got angry and wanted to destroy them.

But Moses interceded. When he got back to camp, "he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it." And he challenged the people to follow their Creator God but some were killed by the sword and everyone received a plague. Not everyone died for their sin even though God labeled everyone stiff-necked.

We clearly get the sense in this story, that just like in the Jonah story, every Assyrian and every Israelite was considered guilty. And I can just imagine that if I was there, I'd say, "But I'm not part of the Assyrian evil, and I didn't contribute any jewelry to make the golden calf, nor did I worship it, so why should I repent and suffer?" But, that's not how God saw it. And today I think God still sees communal sin – especially when we benefit from it.

Despite our questions about this kind of story, it's there for a reason. If we want to take the Bible seriously, we must make peace with stories like this. And find ways to not be stiff-necked. Have you ever seen someone who is **stiff-necked**? Their jaw juts out, the teeth grit, the eyes narrow, the voice takes on an angry tone, and the neck becomes a forward jutting pillar of defiance. 7 times the Bible describes the Israelites this way. God's people receive this negative label. They had a seeing problem.

If we are honest with ourselves, all of us get stiff-necked at times. At any age. We become inflexible toward each other and also toward God and the things of God. And it's not just individuals. Whole groups can also exhibit the same kind of hard-headed behavior. Perspectives and attitudes can be carried on for generations.

For example, every country has stories they need to confess as to how they treated immigrants. We need to remember that we are not immune to this behavior – regardless of the reasons. Even though you and I did not do that, and don't do that today, we are still part of that story as Canadians, even years later.

What's refreshing about the study guide to become a Canadian citizen, is that unpleasant history is not hidden. The tension between English speakers, Metis, Quebecers, Acadians and Aborigines is referred to. The discrimination toward the Chinese, who were invited to come build the railroads, but then the apology for the head tax for them to stay is briefly shared. When I was in Alberta I worked with one of the Chinese descendants of this head tax and heard his family's story. And do we remember Canada put 8,000 former Austro-Hungarian persons, mainly Ukrainian men into 24 labor camps, from 1914 to 1920, even though Britain advised against this policy?

I share this because as Canadians, we too, have this history, and should learn from it. The same goes for the various ways people in society face discrimination today in direct or subtle ways. Even legal ways. Are we allowing ourselves to see and do we work at making sure discrimination in all forms is reduced? Or do we go with the flow and keep our eyes from seeing? Do we blame the victims instead of seeing how we stacked the deck against them and maybe still do? Do we fight against sinful cultural habits?

I think with various Bible stories and however you and I got here, whatever our nation has done that was sinful, we too are guilty of that sin. We cannot, not be stained by the sins of those who went before us. Scripture tells us, and we know from systems theory that the sins of the father and the results of the sins of the mothers, are visited upon the children, even to the third and fourth and at times the 20 generation. (Numbers 14:17-18) This is why raising children well is so crucial.

When it comes to the various **First Nations** issues, the Christian church has a double whammy, or to say it another way, Canadian Christians have a double responsibility to help make things right. The church has been part of mistreating Aborigines. So Canadian congregations need to be part of helping Aborigines.

How to do this? – is a healthy conversation. What to expect of Aborigines today, what they need to be responsible for, needs to have more attention. And we need to know our history – to understand what we should not continue to do. At the same time, we have been part of past sins, and we have benefitted from those actions, and people suffer today because of the past. So we need to be part of the solution, of the healing, and to not do what our ancestors and the nation did in the past.

After all, the Bible tells us, we are peace makers, we want to help everyone including ourselves experience justice, and we are to “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:15) It's a miracle that so many First Nations and Metis people today are brothers and sisters in Christ.

No nation anywhere can avoid communal sin. Each of us can do some awful things, but all together, we can collectively create far more devastation than we could ever conceive of doing individually. Individual repentance is a good thing. Communal repentance is even better. It results in far greater change in the world. May we have eyes to see.

Because all of us live in nations, all are participants and beneficiaries or suffer today, of the mistakes of those nations, simply by virtue or vice of our citizenship. We can not escape communal blame and so need to see & engage in communal repentance. As the Assyrian King said, “Who knows, God can't stand sin, but He may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger.”