

## **Children's talk and reflection given at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 18 July 2021 by Rev Peg Pfab**

### **Children's Time**

I want to share this story about an elder of a Native American tribe Nation. This elder wanted to teach his grandchild about life.

He said to his grandchild, "A fight is going on inside me,. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is bad – he is cynicism, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

The elder continued, "But the other wolf is good – that wolf is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too."

The grandchild thought for a minute and then asked the elder, "Which wolf will win?"

The elder simply replied, "The one you feed."

### **Reflection: Ephesians 2: 11-14; 17-19**

Ephesians raises a question for me: if we have been made one in Christ why do we live in what appears to be such a fragmented, hostile world? Why do Christians sometimes use this and similar passages as proof texts that Jesus is the only manifestation of God, a belief which has led to all types of pride-fullness, proselytizing, colonization, and even cultural and spiritual genocide—in short increasing the fragmentation of creation?

Interpreting this passage and others through the lens of the Cosmic Christ might give us another way of hearing it. This concept says that the Cosmic Christ is much bigger and older than either Jesus of Nazareth or the Christian religion, because the Cosmic Christ is whenever the material and the divine co-exist--the perfect co-inherence of matter and Spirit. The Cosmic Christ is our shortcut word for "The Body of God" ---that unity of matter and spirit ...of all that was and is and will be. As John's Gospel says, "in the beginning was the Word and all that was made was made through him." Jesus of Nazareth was a human incarnation of that same Mystery; the model and prophet for the unification of all since the very beginning.

Then how did we get to our present situation of fragmentation and hostility? More to the point, how can we get back to the unity desired for us by God, that unity which has somehow been fragmented by human choices and behaviors?

Think about this: What is so important to us humans that we would choose to live with hostility, war, violence, poverty, all kinds of isms...rather than live in a peaceful unified humanity? Pride, greed, violence: don't they all go back to the fight or flight instinct? Underlying all of the brokenness is perhaps the fear that we will be in danger or in need and no one will come to help us. So we fight, whether physical y or psychically; feed the bad wolves, if you want to refer back to the children's story.

And yet Jesus' ministry was all about overcoming those fears to love. And throughout history there are, and have been, transformational leaders and prophets and visionaries. And they have one thing in common: a belief that humans are capable of moving toward love, and unity and peace; becoming less fragmented and shattered. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Change takes a long time, but it does happen.

I have been reading a book called, *Human Kind: A Hopeful History* by Rutger Bregman. His thesis is that, in spite of all the negative stories of humans, and to the contrary to what we hear from news outlets, humans **are basically kind and trusting**. And the arc of history, long term, **is toward a more peaceful society**. It seems contrary to our experience, doesn't it? It often seems violence and fragmentation is not only increasing...it is inevitable. Bregman maintains this is partly because most of the news we hear is about horrific happenings; precisely because they **are** atypical. He maintains that distrust, fragmentation and violence often occurs because institutions, while pretending to protect people from their lower natures, actually disallows people's humanness. But he says, "If we believe that most people are decent and kind, we can rethink how we organize our institutions and our lives."

Importantly, Bregman maintains that we need to change the understanding of the word realism, which has currently become synonymous with cynical. His book (all 455 pages) is an exhaustive journey through prehistory and history... through science, philosophy, religion, politics, brain science and economics...to support his theory that in fact the world is NOT getting worse; that "it's really the cynic who is out of touch; in truth people are deeply inclined to be kind to one another."

I admit I have yet to digest much of his book. You may read the book and find it much too optimistic ...however I will opt for optimism and hope over pessimism and despair. If we don't believe that peace and justice is **possible** it will never become **probable**.

Does this not connect in some way with our readings this morning? The Cosmic Christ can enable us to believe there is much hope for repairing the brokenness...we are created for unity and are "hardwired for solidarity", as one sociologist says. Jesus, a manifestation of the Cosmic Christ, was always calling us to call to the healing of humanity.

Here is where I believe the faith community finds its truest purpose---to help rebirth hope; to heal the fragmentation; to empower us to love under the most difficult of circumstances; to develop compassion; to feed the good wolf.

We feed the good wolf through kindness; by affirming each other and the goodness we see in each other. In the faith community we can practice how to understand differences; how to respond to conflict in a respectful way; how to ask for forgiveness when we have hurt someone; how to offer forgiveness without pretending the offense was OK. The faith community can be a laboratory where we practice healing that which is broken.

I'll share a couple of examples: First story is about "Jim". He was very passionate about social justice and always felt that his little Presbyterian church was not doing enough; that it had to be forced to "do more." People respected his views but got pretty upset with his "in your face" attitude. Then Jim developed a very aggressive cancer and was told he had only a

couple of months to live. As I visited with him one day, I asked about a memorial service. He was adamant he wanted nothing; no service in church; just his family at the grave side. I reminded him that it could be a comfort for his wife and daughter to have a service. He finally told me the reason he didn't want one. Jim thought people at church disliked him so much that no one would come to the service and that would be really sad for his family. He believed that the alienation he felt was not fixable. However when some of the elders understood Jim was dying, they had a think among themselves. They went to visit him and told him that even though they sometimes disagreed strongly they had always appreciated and respected his sincere commitment to social justice. Some long-standing rifts were healed. Jim changed his mind about a memorial service. He died on a Christmas night; the church was full for his memorial service, which indeed was deeply comforting to his wife and daughter. But isn't it sad that too often it is only when someone is dying that we can find reconciliation?

Another story. Another congregation. There was family: wife, husband and three year old child who always sat up front, just to the right of the pulpit during worship. The child would sometimes get a bit active and fidgety and start talking during the sermon and prayers. It didn't bother me but it did bother some people who felt worship should be more sedate. One day the dad called me very upset. They had received an anonymous letter from a member, telling them that if their daughter couldn't behave they should either take her to the church child care ...or perhaps find a different church. Needless to say, the mom and dad were very hurt. I wrote a note in our church newsletter just saying a member had received an anonymous letter from someone in the church, and asking that person to contact me for mediation ...because that wasn't the way we wanted to live together in this faith community. The person who wrote it did call me.

I was surprised to find out it was an older woman who was normally a kind person. She and I and the family met. She was able to say she was very ashamed and embarrassed by her actions. She had been at the end of her rope; stressed out and exhausted about health concerns for herself and her husband. She just wanted peace and quiet in worship. The little girl's parents talked about how they had waited for many years for this child. They both had fairly demanding jobs and felt they didn't want to leave their daughter in another child-care situation on a weekend. They were embarrassed and sad that the child couldn't be accepted in church. We listened to each other, cried together and prayed together...a place of brokenness was healed.

Just small examples; but examples of change that can occur when people can listen with compassion. When we can see the goodness and decency in each other, we can heal some of the brokenness. We feed the good wolf. The more we trust and move out from **small** encounters, the more we can help in healing the brokenness and re-establishing unity in larger institutions.

Bregman gives a few of his "rules" for building different and better institutions:

---When in doubt, assume the best.

---Think in win-win scenarios.

---Ask more questions; train your compassion; try to understand others even if you don't "get" where they are coming from.

---Avoid much of the news that just sensationalizes violence and discord; that too often leads us to think there is no hope for the world.

So some questions for all of us today:

---Do you believe that God is calling us to unity and to heal the broken world? Do you believe through the power of the Cosmic Christ it is possible to return to unity?

---Are you willing to be involved in healing work over the long haul, knowing you will most likely not see the total fulfilment of that promise?

---Can you believe that most people are decent and kind? Can you make a commitment to seeing and affirming the goodness in people and not focusing on the negative? Can you commit to actually telling people of the goodness you see in them?

---Can you be a realistic who is not a cynic?

---Can you nourish and help grow your good wolf?

---Can you live in the hope and the promise that we **are truly** all no longer strangers and aliens but all citizens in the household of God; all unified in the Christ?

When I look round the Knox community, I see incredible wisdom, courage, compassion and creativity. Together this community can feed and grow a whole pack of good wolves. May it be so.

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