

Peace Lamp Offering: A Reflection on Sanctum Survivor

By Dr. Benjamin Leis

As some of you already know, I was asked to take part in a homelessness challenge for 36 hours in the streets of Saskatoon. I was deeply touched by your donations and words of support leading up to, during, and after the challenge. Thank you.

The goal of this challenge was to raise money for sanctum care group, which is a nonprofit organization which helps house patients with uncontrolled HIV, substance use issues, and homelessness. I did this challenge with multiple community leaders including Charlie Clarke the Saskatoon Mayor, MLA Marv Friesen, and well known philanthropist David Dube. As a group, we were primarily downtown, on 20th St., and as far as 33rd and Idylwild. We slept on cardboard boxes in Kinsmen Park at night.

During the 36 hours we had to face challenges. For example, apply for housing, apply for social assistance, fill medication prescriptions, and access outpatient care. Without money, transportation, or access to clean clothes, it was very difficult to even meet our basic needs, let alone try to accomplish the above tasks. All our energy was spent surviving; there was barely any room for anything else. And we only did this for 36 hours. Imagine if that was our reality.

Our society tends to be meritocratic; we believe that anyone can prosper no matter the circumstance with good work ethic, an honest approach, integrity, and perseverance. Although this is a seemingly productive thought process, it overemphasizes our personal efforts to reach a prosperous life situation. I have often reflected on what led to my own life successes. I had so many advantages in life: I'm a tall, white, male. My parents were highly educated. I've always had shelter and love. I avoided major trauma both physical and emotional. I am not disabled. I can count on the people in my life.

I met Stacey last week—she has cognitive impairment. This made her vulnerable to peer pressure and also abuse. In short, she grew up in an unsupportive home. She became homeless after drugs were introduced to her as a way to cope with negative emotions. She has since developed psychosis and has a lot of trouble with reasoning because she isn't sure what is real and does not trust anyone. How is Stacey supposed to treat her psychiatric illness without shelter? How can she break the cycle of addiction without having her basic needs met on a daily basis? To lead a healthy life, the most basic thing to have is a shelter. Without it, one can't hold a job, have reliable access to food, address health care needs, accumulate useful belongings, and build wealth. Once a person becomes homeless, they face innumerable barriers to reversing that situation, including losing limbs from frostbite. The system is designed to help people who have access to basic

things—water, bathrooms, shelter, food. Unfortunately, these are inconsistently provided.

While I was living on the street, it was a privilege to hear the story of many people who have fallen under very difficult circumstances. Some of them had found stable housing. They were willing to not only share what little they had with us, but I was astounded at how many of them were leaders in their community. You could say that I met some of God's angels. I met Leanne (prefers Lee) who recognized that it was very difficult for her neighbours on Avenue V to make the long journey to the food bank on Avenue C. She managed to arrange for the food bank to drop off enough food twice a week to help feed those who could not make that long journey. Within 30 minutes of opening on the day I was there, all the food bags were gone. I did not have the courage to stay longer to see who she might turn away. She would love to be able to hand out more bags and she continues to work with the food bank to grow her operation.

I also met Mathias who was once a gang member in Saskatoon's inner city. He knew he needed to leave this life but couldn't figure out how. He heard about str8 up, an organization that supports individuals to transition out of gang life. They gave him counseling, transitioned him to different housing, and helped him love himself again. Over several months, he left the gang, is helping raise his children, and now works for str8 up. He recently had a proposal approved to offer free tattoo removal for gang members wanting to leave that life. Removing his tattoos was a big step in his personal healing and he wanted to improve access to that service for others like him. What a remarkable story of courage and determination.

I am glad to say that I have forged important connections with the other participants in the challenge. We have vowed to work together toward progress, whether by reducing barriers to homelessness, supporting those who are homeless, or funding research to study vulnerable populations.

If I may be so bold, I would challenge each of you in the congregation this week to introduce yourself to a homeless person and try to get to know them. Look them in the eyes and say hello. I know firsthand that these people feel invisible and deprioritized. A simple greeting and acknowledgment of existence can bring hope. Hope is a very good start. Please pray with me:

Dear God, after this challenge, I am left with hope. Hope that there are solutions for our most marginalized populations and hope that there is energy in the community to support those that need help. Give us strength and resolve as a congregation to support organizations and people who are doing your work in the community. Amen.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

But Some Doubted

My perspective of these last verses from Matthew’s gospel forever changed one fateful day in seminary in the first weeks of a course on preaching. The first assignment that semester entailed the professor, June Alliman Yoder, requiring each student to offer an impromptu five minute sermon. This is how it worked.

When a student’s turn came up, Professor Yoder would give them a small sheet of paper with a scripture text on it. The student would have one minute to prepare a five minute sermon which would then be preached to the class after that minute of prep. Nerve racking and daunting to say the least. Professor Yoder made the point that as future pastors there would likely be times we would be asked on the spot to offer a prayer, bring a few words, or maybe even preach.

Mark Kauffman got Matthew 28:16-20. He was drawn to the phrase “but some doubted”. He spoke from his heart about the challenges of certitude for any of us. Pastors and theologians, he noted, bear the burden that it is assumed we have it all figured out. He wasn’t sure he had it all figured out just yet. I had heard this text read in church gatherings many times; I had read this section of Matthew repeatedly. I had never paused to consider that some doubted. Clearly, Kauffman’s short sermon that day left an impression. Some sermons are like that.

Section One: The text in context

There are several wonderful aspects to this text which helps us better understand the implications that “some doubted”. For example, take the instructions of the resurrected Jesus to the women at the tomb to tell the disciples that they should go to Galilee to see him (v.10). Ah, Galilee, the place it all began; the place the fisher-folk were called to be disciples (4.12ff). Returning to Galilee is almost like putting the story on a circular loop. Having learned a little something on this first run at the Jesus course, let us all go back to the beginning and do it again. Maybe this time through we will absorb a bit more from the Teacher. “Galilee, in the call narratives of chapter 4 where it all began, also reflects hope for the Gentiles (4.15-16), the wider family of nations to whom the disciples will soon be sent (28.19)”. This is how chapter 28 closes. Galilee is both grounding and commissioning.

In Galilee they go to “the” mountain—not “a” mountain, but “the” mountain. “The location recalls earlier peaks in the story, such as the temptation story (4:8-10),” Jesus’ sermon on the mount, and the mount of transfiguration (17.1-8). Like those mountains, this one signifies Jesus’ authority to gather and teach the people of God.

“When the moment of reunion finally occurs, the experience evokes two reactions. As did the magi at Jesus’ birth (2.11), the disciples worship Jesus. Some, however, even as they worship, do so with the same hesitant or little faith that has characterized the disciples throughout the Gospel. They doubt (cf. 14.28-33| 17.20-21). It will take the reassuring *word* of Jesus in the verses that follow to fortify them for their calling.”

The risen Christ doesn’t scold the doubting disciples. The risen Christ doesn’t boot them off the mountain. The risen Christ comes to those who doubt with words of encouragement and a promise of companionship, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”. I am with you always. Always.

The specific language of the Risen Christ to conclude Matthew’s Gospel is loaded with allusions which communicate to the disciples that they have a Good Shepherd who goes into the future before them and will guard their hearts and minds. The form of speech draws upon enthronement texts (cf Phil. 2:5-11; Dan. 7.13-14). The language models divine speech in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen. 46.3-4). Words ascribed to king Cyrus of Persia here appear on the lips of the Raised One in approximate form.¹ The royal, divine, and cosmic scope of these phrases underscore that the disciples will be supported with a mighty arm and never abandoned.² This is good news for all who question and doubt and are unsure.

And yet those who were doubting were also ones who were worshipping. It is a wonderful paradox that those who worship also doubt. That is worth a ponder.

Section Two: Faith Seeking Understanding

Faith seeking understanding (*fides quarrens intellectum*) is a classical definition of the theological pursuit coined by St. Anselm (1033-1109). Daniel Migliore, professor emeritus of theology at Princeton, comments on the implications of a faith seeking understanding. “[T]heology is faith asking questions and struggling to find at least provisional answers to these questions. Christian faith is no sedative for world-weary souls, no satchelful of ready answers to the deepest questions of life. Instead, Christian faith invariably prompts questions, sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, ourselves, our world. Consequently, faith has

¹ In Chr 36.23 Cyrus says, “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth”.

² Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991), pp 401-402.

nothing in common with indifference to the search for truth, or fear of it, or the arrogant claim to possess it fully”.³

The Greek word used for “doubt” in today’s passage has as its root (δύο), in the English word two, as in the number two.⁴ Do we have a different feel to someone who “doubts” as opposed to someone who “is of two minds”? I suspect so. We may view the doubter as a person of limited imagination whereas the person of two minds might be considered a person in the midst of discernment. Perhaps the openness which comes from questions, discerning, and perhaps even doubting is that essential element required for applying the Jesus story to a new stage of life, a new generation of the church, a new context within society. When we return to Galilee to begin the whole saga over again it might be very important that we have the posture of people of two minds. Holding worship and doubt together as those disciples did on “the” Galilean mountain, is a powerful and provocative model of discipleship to Jesus.

On this point I will share part of a daily meditation distributed by Richard Rohr from earlier this year:⁵

I worry about "true believers" who cannot carry any doubt or anxiety at all.... Doubt and faith are actually correlative terms. People of great faith often suffer bouts of great doubt because they continue to grow. Mother Teresa experienced decades of this kind of doubt, as was revealed after her death. In a letter to a trusted spiritual director she wrote, "Darkness is such that I really do not see — neither with my mind nor with my reason. The place of God in my soul is blank. — There is no God in me." The very fact that the world media and people in general were scandalized by this demonstrates how limited is our understanding of the nature of biblical faith.

It seems a movement from certitude to doubt and through doubt to acceptance of life's mystery is necessary in all encounters, intellectual breakthroughs, and relationships, not just with the Divine... Author Sue Monk Kidd has written eloquently about the disruption spiritual seekers often encounter in midlife and our resistance to it. She wonders:

“What has happened to our ability to dwell in unknowing, to live inside a question and coexist with the tensions of uncertainty? Where is our willingness to incubate pain and let it birth something new? What has happened to patient unfolding, to endurance? These things are what form the ground of waiting. And if you look carefully, you'll see that they're also the

³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), p. 2.

⁴ *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, edited by Harold Moulton (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library which is an imprint of Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), pp 108-109.

⁵ Richard Rohr, "Faith and Doubt are Not Opposites" (Center for Action and Contemplation), week five Unknowing.

seedbed of creativity and growth—what allows us to do the daring and to break through to newness. . . . Creativity flourishes not in certainty but in questions. Growth germinates not in tent dwelling but in upheaval. Yet the seduction is always security rather than venturing, instant knowing rather than deliberate waiting.”⁶

Section Three: the discipleship of faith filled doubt

I offer several short examples of how doubt is interwoven into our journey of discipleship. Each of these emerge from comments made by panel members in our Sunday morning sessions on “Understanding Gender and Sexual Diversity”.

I have heard panel members express concerns about not always feeling up to the task of educating others. Comments from several panel members reminded me of those who received the great commission to make disciples of the nations. How does one do this when one is processing new experiences for which we are learning a new language? I can imagine some of the disciples wondered this. It is scary and very tempting to avoid vulnerable. To not embrace the commission before us, however, leaves me feeling sad; like we are not living into the invitation of this day. So, we step out with wavering faith. Amidst our self doubts and questions and uncertainties, we seek to represent our experiences to our families and our communities with the love of Christ. Maybe the concerns we carry will make us more humble apologists. We would probably benefit from more humble evangelists. Feelings of inadequacy and imperfection did not keep the Galilean disciples stranded on “the mountain”. Like them, a path of discipleship leads down the hill back into the world.

Part of how we grow in confidence for the great tasks to which we are commissioned is through practice. More than once panel members have spoken of practice. Practice new acronyms while brushing one’s teeth. Practice new pronouns in imaginary conversations. Practice, practice, practice. It is not different, I would suggest, than the manner in which we root ourselves in our Christian tradition. We practice so that when we are asked questions—why are you Christian or what is a Mennonite or what is the hope within you—we are better able to engage humbly in potentially transformative conversation. The practice itself of grounding ourselves in habits of the faith (Lord’s Prayer, Bible study, alms giving for example) as well as the language of faith will at the least be transformative for us. But it is not easy to do on one’s own.

More than once I heard reference from panel speakers about the importance of on-going study. This is particularly true for people who are coming to terms

⁶ Sources cited by Richard Rohr in his daily meditation: Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, (Doubleday: 2007), p. 210; Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 1990), p. 25.

with a new reality around them and the circumstances in which their experience has placed them. Meeting the risen Christ on “the mountain” changes things for us. Study helps understanding and gives language. This study comes in the form of reading, or podcasts, and of listening to others. And also in talks with trusted friends where individual learning and experiences are decompressed. Is this not similar to what church leaders might suggest for a person to grow in understanding and confidence within the faith tradition? Reading and conversation on one’s own can go a long way in empowering timid disciples in venturing forth. Community aides that trek from the mountain in confidence to all nations and among all peoples.

Conclusion

Way back in that seminary class on preaching I learned several important lessons. Invariably we will find ourselves in situations for which we feel inadequate. We may not always have the right words. When our hearts are set on imparting the love and peace of Christ, however, often times our intentions will be that which carries the day. Impromptu sermons, prayers and reflections will happen.

And because impromptu moments will find us, a little learning and study can really help. At least it begins giving a language to why we think, act, and speak the way we do. But I will never have it all figured out. If I do get it all figured out, I will either be dead or have taken an ill advised rabbit trail off the Way of worship and doubt described in Matthew 28.

The burden of the tasks placed before us is made lighter when shared in a group. We were a seminary class-- we could sympathize with growing edges and encourage one another when feeling inadequate. We are a church community—we can sympathize with our growing edges and encourage one another when feeling overwhelmed.

I will close this sermon with a prayer; please join me. “Loving God, thank you for leading us into a time where more of reality is being unveiled for us all to see. We pray that you will take away our natural temptation for cynicism, denial, fear and despair. Help us have the courage to awaken to greater truth, greater humility, and greater care for one another. May we place our hope in what matters and what lasts, trusting in your eternal presence and love. Amen”.⁷

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Benediction: 2nd Corinthians 13:11,13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you...The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen.

⁷ Rohr, Ibid.