

November 17, 2024—“Who Is My Neighbour?”

Today is a really important contribution to this year’s *Becoming Good Relatives* version of our annual *Hope Lives* series, because today seeks to make the turn from concepts “out there” (awareness of our world) to actual change “in here” (our hearts).

On week #1 of the series, we discovered God’s heart for the healing of all the nations, casting the vision for the direction we’re headed. Then, last week, Laurie Warkentin interviewed Adrian Jacobs, to help us better understand the back-story specific to Canada, when it comes to Indigenous relations, and to appreciate the heart of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report, and its 94 Calls to Action.

Today, to make that crucial turn from information to transformation, we want to stare at one of the specific Calls to Action in the TRC’s report that was directed to the church. Of the five specific Calls to Action directly related to the church, this is #49:

We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*.

Now, if we’re going to make that turn—from information to transformation—for many of us, we probably actually require a little more information. What do these terms mean—phrases like “terra nullius” and “Doctrine of Discovery”, and why do they need to be repudiated? And, perhaps more importantly—in order to personalize things to our church, and to us personally—what would the Jesus whom we claim to follow say about a call to action like this? Just because the TRC’s report is asking churches to do this, is this actually something that we’re supposed to do today in the name of Jesus Christ?

Well, to begin, let's start with this phrase "**terra nullius**". This is a Latin term for "**nobody's land**", and has been used to imply that if no official state owns land, then its title is up for the taking. Sounds simple, except when people already lived there!

This is where the "Doctrine of Discovery" begins. It starts with a theology, particularly a Christian theology, that views anyone other than Christian as lesser-than. And, in some cases, didn't even view people who weren't Christian as people at all.

You can trace this back to some of the early decrees of Popes in the Roman Catholic Church—known as "Papal Bulls". One of the more famous ones was in 1455, by Pope Nicholas V, called "Romanus Pontifex". It guided the king of Portugal with what to do, should they encounter other people when they explored Africa. They were:

...to fight, subjugate, and conquer "those rising against the Catholic faith and struggling to extinguish Christian Religion"—namely, the "Saracens (Muslims) and pagans".

Do you see how that spiritual theology quickly turned into a broader political mandate?

Now, we might assume that this mindset is archaic, but we need to appreciate that this same theology of how Christians viewed non-Christians, and how that applied to terra nullius, was guiding the thinking of Christopher Columbus when he first arrived in the Caribbean, as it was when John Cabot arrived in Newfoundland. Christian European settlers began to occupy North America with a terra nullius approach that was rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery. If they found land, and no Christian owned it, they could occupy and claim legal title of it—even if it was inhabited by other people, because those other people, if they weren't Christian, weren't really "people" in the full sense. This combined theology guided early European settlers in claiming new territory.

But we have to appreciate, it wasn't just theology. This mindset became baked into our legal system in regards to property ownership. Fast forward to 1823, where the US Supreme Court nullified the deal a colonial man had made purchasing land directly from Indigenous people—claiming that you can only purchase land by acquiring title, and only the colonized state possesses and has established title, since, before them, the land was terra nullius. Because the people who originally occupied the land weren't "people", by this theological definition, they never owned the land in the first place, so as it was colonized by "Christian nations" it became legally owned and established land.

That's a fuller picture of the Doctrine of Discovery. In her book, *The Land is Not Empty*, Indigenous Christian author Sarah Augustine summarizes it this way:

The Doctrine of Discovery is a theological, philosophical, and legal framework dating to the fifteenth century that gave Christian governments moral and legal right to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous peoples.

Do we understand those terms now—that Call to Action #49 in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report is referring to—and appreciate how they came to be?

A final word on ideas like terra nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery, is that their legacy lives on today. Not just in the legal framework of land title and ownership, but in more culturally pervasive ways—where, at its core, things birthed out of a mindset that people were not of equal value. Where does the idea of residential schools come from, and of assimilating people into European culture come from? It's not just a mindset of *differentiation*; it becomes one of *domination*. This worldview affects issues of sovereignty, human rights, and the justice system today, in ways that propagate the oppression of Indigenous people. So what do you suppose Jesus would say to that?

Interestingly enough, Jesus *already has* said something to this very mindset, recorded in a conversation that Luke recounts in chapter 10 of his gospel. In verse 25:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered, ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

Jesus is talking with an “expert in the law”—they knew their stuff. And, because they knew their stuff, they could cite what Jesus had Himself referred to as the “Great Commandment” when asked what mattered most to God’s heart. But notice, in this legal expert’s testing of Jesus, “he wanted to justify himself.” What does that mean?

It means that, in his culture and theological understanding, there was a specific definition of “neighbour”. In his case, that definition originated in the Old Testament:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.

To this man, at that time, his definition of “neighbour” was a “relative or friend”.

And, in fact, his understanding of the law actually precluded him from loving certain other people, beyond relatives and friends. A Jewish commentary stated:

If the Gentiles be in any danger of death, we are not bound to deliver them... such a one is not thy neighbour.

So, his question to Jesus is a legitimate one: who am I permitted *not* to love?

In response, Jesus tells one of His most famous stories. Verse 30 reads:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side...

A man was attacked by robbers, stripped of his clothes, and left half dead. These are essential details in the story, since language and dress were the only ways you could tell where someone was from. Now, you couldn't know whether they were Jewish!

This is why the priest passed by on the other side. Returning from his purification ceremony in Jerusalem, he couldn't risk becoming unclean by getting too close to a potentially dead body—let alone a Gentile one. The Levite (a temple assistant) most likely followed the lead of the priest, whom he'd watched downhill.

Then, Jesus provided the legal expert with the surprising twist of the story:

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

In this case, the man stopped, and noticed. He let his heart be affected. He got close, and made contact. He burdened himself by carrying the man. He inconvenienced himself by taking the man to an inn. And he sacrificed expense and additional time to ensure the wounded man was cared for. The kicker: he was a hated Samaritan!

The parable of the Good Samaritan isn't the end of the story; after telling the parable, in response to the legal expert's justifying question of Jesus, the story ends:

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

The man asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?”—implying that there were humans he was legally and spiritually justified in not needing to love. After telling the story in response, Jesus re-framed the question to, “Which person was a neighbour?”

Confronted with a politic and theology of His day that permitted the un-love of certain people, excluding them from the definition of “neighbour”, Jesus did two things. First, He re-defined “neighbour” to include everyone, even those culture groomed you to ignore. Then, He re-defined “love” to a heart-driven, active, sacrificial, inconvenient, and demanding degree—what the legal expert described as “showing mercy”. In His day, this is how Jesus moved ideas from the head to the heart of this legal expert.

When it comes to lingering attitudes of the Doctrine of Discovery, I believe Jesus wants the same thing to happen in our lives today. Again, Sarah Augustine writes:

The dominant narrative in the United States explains that Indigenous Peoples either sold their lands in a fair bargain or lost their lands as a result of legal war. Regrettable, but “just how it goes.” Few people have heard of the Doctrine of Discovery and are surprised when they realize that these injustices are perfectly legal.

We live in the shadows and legacy of a similar worldview—that some people are of greater value than other people, so there are justified limits to who you must love.

So, when it comes to the TRC's Call to Action #49—the church repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery—I think it means the same two things Jesus was trying to teach the legal expert in Luke chapter 10. Similar to what we learned in Acts chapter 6, I think there's a “message of Jesus” component, and there's a “mission of justice” aspect. To appropriately repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, there are both words *and* deeds.

First off, it's worth repudiating verbally. Every single human being is an image-bearer of the Creator God, and Jesus was a gift because God loves the whole world. In Jesus' eyes, there are no categories of differentiated value, and there are no limitations to whom the “love your neighbour” law of love applies. Whatever “biblical” interpretation birthed the Doctrine of Discovery, it definitively was not the heart of Jesus Christ. So, as followers of Jesus we want to personally and collectively declare that with our words.

But we don't want to stop there—which is why it's such good news that there's still a week to go in this year's *Hope Lives* series. If we're going to correct the mindset that some people are undeserving or off-limits of love, and instead—like the Good Samaritan—learn to notice need, come toward it, establish relationship, and advocate for those suffering and oppressed in inconvenient and cost-demanding ways, we can reclaim Jesus' ever-widening definition of “neighbour”. Here at Southridge, that's what we mean by “Becoming Good Relatives” with Indigenous people. We're not just looking to offer some pity or charity; we're looking to establish relationships of mutuality, respect and support. Patty Krawec calls it *Becoming Kin*. Jesus called it reclaiming neighbour.

In the final week of our series together, we're going to share some of the practical ways each of us and us together can make that turn from information to transformation, by dismantling of the Doctrine of Discovery through living a life of love!