

MANY OF YOU KNOW THAT OVER THE COURSE OF THE SUMMER OUR MINISTRY STAFF --WADE, BRIAN AND I -- HAVE ALL OFFERED LEADERSHIP AT THE UNITED CHURCH'S LEARNING CENTER IN THE OKANAGAN -- NARAMATA CENTER.

WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW IS THAT OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS THERE HAVE BEEN THOSE IN THE CHURCH WHO HAVE BEEN CRITICAL OF NARAMATA CENTER -- SAYING THAT THEIR PROGRAMMING HAS DRIFTED AWAY FROM ITS CHRISTIAN ROOTS. THERE'S NOT ENOUGH MENTION OF JESUS IN THEIR LITERATURE -- NOT ENOUGH BIBLE STUDY -- NOT ENOUGH EXPLICIT CHRISTIAN CONTENT.

ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES REFUSES TO LEAD PROGRAMS AT THE CENTER ANYMORE -- THEY'VE LOST THEIR PURPOSE HE SAYS.

ALTHOUGH I'VE NOT BEEN OF THAT VIEW MYSELF -- A FEW SUMMERS AGO I DISCOVERED THAT I DID CARRY A BIAS WITHIN ME ABOUT NARAMATA CENTER'S PROGRAMMING--WHICH PARTS OF IT WERE "CHRISTIAN" AND WHICH PARTS WERE SECULAR OR PERHAPS BETTER SAID -- WHICH PARTS WERE SPIRITUAL AND WHICH PARTS WERE NOT.

IT HAPPENED THE FIRST TIME I WAS EVER ASKED TO LEAD A WEEK LONG PROGRAM AT THE CENTER.

WHEN THE VARIOUS PROGRAM LEADERS GATHERED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WEEK I LOOKED AROUND THE CIRCLE AND FIGURED THAT I WAS ONE OF ONLY A COUPLE PEOPLE WHO WERE LEADING EXPLICITLY CHRISTIAN PROGRAMS.

BRIAN WAS THERE LEADING A GOSPEL SINGING WORKSHOP -- I WOULD HAVE CALLED THAT CHRISTIAN OR SPIRITUAL—BUT THE OTHERS WHO WERE LEADING SUCH VARIED PROGRAMS AS POTTERY --PAPER MAKING – BASKET WEAVING – MOUNTAIN BIKING – KAYAKING -- POETRY WRITING - -TAI CHI – IT DIDN'T SEEM TO ME LIKE THEY WERE OFFERING "CHRISTIAN" OR SPIRITUAL PROGRAMS.

IT'S NOT THAT I WAS CONCIOUSLY DIVIDING LEADERS AND PROGRAMS INTO THOSE CATEGORIES – BUT I LATER DISCOVERED THAT UNCONCIOUSLY I WAS.

THE AWARENESS CAME A COUPLE DAYS INTO THE WEEK WHEN MY CO-LEADERS BEGAN TO TALK ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THEIR PROGRAMS. THE LEADER OF THE POTTERY CLASS SHARED HOW THE FIRST THING HE DID WHEN HE MET HIS GROUP WAS MAKE A BEAUTIFUL POT AND THEN LET IT COLLAPSE INTO A DISASTER – TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE WEEK WAS NOT TO BE ABOUT STRIVING FOR PERFECTION—THE PROCESS WAS AS IMPORTANT AS THE PRODUCT.

THE LEADER OF THE PAPER MAKING GROUP WAS ECSTATIC THAT AFTER ONLY ONE DAY THE GROUP HAD FIGURED OUT THAT WHAT THEY WERE DOING WASN'T ABOUT THE PAPER THEY WERE CREATING – IT WAS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS THEY WERE FORMING ALONG THE WAY.

THE HEAD OF THE MOUNTAIN BIKING SESSION EXPLAINED TO US THAT MOUNTAIN BIKING IS REALLY ALL ABOUT OVERCOMING FEAR – AND HERE I'D THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT EXERCISE.

AND HAJIME --WHO SEEMS TO PRACTICE TAI CHI IN EVERYTHING HE DOES – SPOKE OF THE TRANSFORMATION THAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE LIVES OF HIS PARTICIPANTS AS THEY OPENED THEMSELVES TO THE ENERGY OF THIS ANCIENT PRACTICE.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE I REALIZED THAT EACH AND EVERY ONE OF MY FELLOW LEADERS WERE TOUCHING LIVES IN DEEPLY MEANINGFUL WAYS – IN LIFE-CHANGING WAYS IN MANY INSTANCES – WITH LOVE AND COMPASSION – CREATIVITY – CHALLENGE – GROWTH AND A SENSE OF BEING PART OF CARING AND PURPOSEFUL COMMUNITY SHAPED AND FORMED BY BIBLICAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS. SURELY THIS WAS ALL "CHRISTIAN." SURELY THIS WAS ALL "SPIRITUAL."

IN OUR GOSPEL READING THIS MORNING – WE HAVE BEFORE US THE ONLY STORY IN OUR BIBLES IN WHICH JESUS IS NOTICEABLY CHANGED BY AN ENCOUNTER WITH SOMEONE WHO IS DIFFERENT THAN HIM.

JESUS IS A JEW – THE SYROPHOENICIAN HE ENCOUNTERS IS A GENTILE – JESUS IS A MAN – SHE IS A WOMAN – HE IS ONE WITH SOCIETAL AUTHORITY – SHE IS NOT.

SHE COMES TO HIM SEEKING HEALING FOR HER DAUGHTER – BUT BECAUSE SHE IS NOT A JEW – JESUS CAN'T FATHOM HOW HE CAN HELP HER – HOW HE CAN EVEN BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HER -- ESPECIALLY WHEN HE ALREADY HAS ENOUGH ON HIS PLATE TAKING CARE OF HIS OWN

– WHEN HIS UNDERSTANDING OF HIS MINISTRY IS THAT IT'S MEANT FOR FOLLOWERS OF THE JEWISH FAITH AND THE JEWISH FAITH ALONE.

“IT IS NOT FAIR TO TAKE THE CHILDREN’S FOOD AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS.” HE SAYS

AND THEN FOR THE FIRST AND ONLY TIME -- JESUS IS TRUMPED IN A DEBATE – THE WOMAN ACCEPTS HIS INSULT BUT CONTINUES TO PRESS HIM.

“YES – SHE SAYS BUT EVEN THE DOGS UNDER THE TABLE EAT THE CHILDREN’S CRUMBS.”

AND IN HER RESPONSE SHE CHALLENGES HIM THAT THERE IS ENOUGH OF WHAT HE HAS TO OFFER TO BE SHARED WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE OUTSIDE HIS TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT

AND SHE SHOWS HIM THAT WHAT IS AT THE CENTER OF HER HEART – IS ALSO AT THE CENTER OF HIS -- CARE AND COMPASSION FOR THE HUMAN FAMILY – INCLUSION OF ALL -- REGARDLESS OF RACE – REGARDLESS OF CREED.

IF YOU WERE HERE LAST SUNDAY – YOU WILL REMEMBER THAT IN LAST WEEK'S BIBLE READING JESUS WAS DEFENDING HIS DISCIPLES FROM CRITICISM BY THE JUDEAN ELITE THAT THEY WERE NOT FOLLOWING "THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS" WHEN THEY ATE WITHOUT WASHING THEIR HANDS.

IN RESPONSE TO THAT I INVITED US TO THINK ABOUT WHICH TRADITIONS AROUND WHICH WE GATHER ARE WORTH HANDING ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION – OUR LIVING TRADITIONS – AND WHICH TRADITIONS ARE SIMPLY HUMAN HABITS THAT WE CAN SAFELY LET GO.

I INVITED US TO PONDER WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH – TO JOIN WITH ME AS WE DISCERN WHAT THAT IS AND HOW BEST WE ARE TO TEND AND NURTURE IT AND PASS IT ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION IN THE CHURCH.

OBVIOUSLY WHAT I HAD TO SAY LAST WEEK STRUCK A CHORD WITH SOME OF YOU BECAUSE I HAD MORE THAN ONE PERSON SHARE WITH ME THEIR LAMENT AT THE GULF THAT EXISTS BETWEEN THEM AND THEIR CHILDREN IN THIS RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD WE LIVE IN.

THE WAY I SEE IT -- THIS MORNING'S STORY OF THE SYROPHONECIAN WOMAN OFFERS US A COUPLE OF CLUES FOR OUR SEARCHING AND OUR DISCERNING ABOUT OUR "TRADITIONS."

THE FIRST CLUE IS THE NOTION THAT THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS SEEN OURSELVES AND THEREFORE OTHERS IS NOT THE ONLY WAY TO SEE OURSELVES AND THEREFORE OTHERS.

SO FOR EXAMPLE IF WE'VE SEEN "CHURCH" AS THE THING THAT HAPPENS EVERY WEEK ON SUNDAY MORNINGS AT 10 IN A BUILDING CALLED A CHURCH – AND CHURCHGOERS AS PEOPLE WHO ATTEND THOSE SERVICES RELIGIOUSLY WEEK IN AND WEEK OUT – IT MAY BE TIME FOR US TO RE-VISIT THAT IDEA.

WHAT IF WE ALSO SAW "CHURCH" AS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE PARENTS GROUP MEET AT SOMEONE'S HOUSE TO LEARN ABOUT WINETASTING FROM ONE OF THEIR MEMBERS – EVEN IF SOME OF THE MEMBERS OF THAT GROUP WILL NEVER ATTEND A SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP SERVICE HERE.

WHAT IF "CHURCH" ALSO MEANS THE COMMUNITY THAT VOLUNTEERS IN THE THRIFT SHOP – INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE MEMBERS OF OTHER CHURCHES – OR SIMPLY NON-RELIGIOUS.

WHAT IF OUR "CHURCH" CONSISTED NOT ONLY OF THE YOUTH WHO ATTEND OUR YOUTH GROUP REGULARLY AND PARTICIPATE IN OUR SERVICES FROM TIME TO TIME – BUT ALSO THE YOUTH WHO JOIN OUR YOUTH GROUP TO GO DOWN TO FIRST UNITED TO SERVE A MEAL EVERY FEW WEEKS-- WHAT IF IT INCLUDED THE CHILDREN WHO WERE HERE FOR OUR VACATION BIBLE CAMP BUT WHO WE WON'T SEE AGAIN UNTIL THE NEXT TIME WE RUN A SIMILAR PROGRAM?

WHAT IF "CHURCH" WERE EXTENDED TO INCLUDE A FRIDAY NIGHT GATHERING HERE AT MOUNT SEYMOUR AROUND A DOCUMENTARY FILM – WITH NO EXPLICIT CHRISTIAN CONTENT -- AND SOME CONVERSATION AFTER THE FILM.

WHAT IF SOME OF THE FOLKS WHO GATHER WITH US ON SUNDAY MORNINGS – OR SING IN OUR GOSPEL CHOIR – OR JOIN OUR SACRED CIRCLE – ARE PRACTICING BUDDHISTS – OR WICCANS – OR SUFIS?

CAN WE SAY THEY TOO ARE PART OF OUR CHURCH? WOULD WE OR COULD WE SAY THAT WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF THEIR LIVES IS ALSO AT THE HEART OF OURS? WE'LL PROBABLY NEVER KNOW FOR SURE UNLESS WE ENGAGE THEM IN THE CONVERSATION.

WHAT IF WE CONSIDERED ALL OF THESE PEOPLE – ALL OF WHOM WE ENCOUNTER THROUGH OUR MINISTRY – AS VITAL CO-PARTICIPANTS IN OUR MINISTRY – AND NOT JUST THOSE OF US WHO GATHER REGULARLY ON SUNDAY MORNINGS? WHAT IF WE ALLOWED THEM TO SHAPE AND FORM OUR MINISTRY?

I ONCE HEARD ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES SAYING SHE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY HER CHILDREN DIDN'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE CHURCH – HOW THEY COULD LIVE SUCH SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT LIVES – UNTIL SHE STARTED TO LISTEN TO THEIR CONVERSATION AT THE DINNER TABLE – AND SHE REALIZED THEY WERE LIVING DEEPLY SPIRITUAL LIVES – LIVING WITH GREAT INTENTION—CARING ABOUT THE THINGS SHE CARED ABOUT IN THE WORLD – THEY JUST WEREN'T DOING IT IN THE SAME WAY SHE WAS DOING IT.

AND ISN'T THAT THE GREATEST CLUE OF ALL AS WE DISCERN WHAT IT IS ABOUT OUR FAITH THAT WE WANT TO HAND ON -- THAT HOW WE HAND ON OUR LIVING TRADITION -- THE HEART OF OUR FAITH -- MIGHT NEED TO BE DONE DIFFERENTLY -- POSSIBLY QUITE DIFFERENTLY?

THE \$99.00 QUESTION OF COURSE IS HOW CAN WE AFFORD TO HAVE A CHURCH THAT ENGAGES PEOPLE IN A VARIETY OF WAYS -- NOT JUST PRIMARILY THROUGH OUR COMMITTED SUNDAY MORNING COMMUNITY? THERE WON'T BE ENOUGH BREAD TO GO AROUND WILL THERE?

OUR MINISTRY NEEDS TO BE ABOUT US DOESN'T IT -- IT CAN'T BE ABOUT EVERYONE WHO WANTS TO ENGAGE THINGS THE WAY THEY WANT TO ENGAGE THINGS? CAN IT -- HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN THAT?

HOW CAN I FEED THE ISRAELITES AND YOU GENTILES TOO? SAYS JESUS TO THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN.

BUT WE'RE HUNGRY TOO -- SHE REPLIES -- EVEN THE CRUMBS WILL DO -- WE ARE HUNGRY.

THE SPIRITUAL HUNGER THAT EXISTS IN OUR WORLD TODAY IS VERY GREAT INDEED – WE MAY ASK -- HOW CAN WE AFFORD TO FEED THAT HUNGER WHEN PEOPLE AREN'T COMING TO THE TABLE THE WAY THEY USED TO?

HOW CAN WE AFFORD NOT TO – OR AT LEAST TO TRY—TO MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE AT – TO HAVE OUR MINISTRY CHANGED BY THEIR NEEDS -- AND WHO KNOWS MAYBE TO BE FED AND NOURISHED AND HEALED AND CHANGED WHILE WERE AT IT.