

2020 09 27 TUMC Sermon

What is Being Revealed: The Games We Play

[Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32](#)

Referenced: [A Mennonite Agenda for Research and Action on Antisemitism](#)

Referenced: [Distancing Behaviours](#)

Prayer of Illumination

Open our senses, Holy Spirit, to your truth

Gather our different modes of seeing, hearing and understanding

Open our spirits, Holy Spirit, and provoke generosity

Curiosity, vulnerability, and clarity of response

Open our hearts, Holy Spirit, and breathe fire

To thaw, to warm, to boil, to distill

In each of us as we each have need.

In the name of Jesus, amen

Picture it. Kent, England, 2008. I'm walking down a country lane with a few thousand friends, on a protest march against a coal fired power station. I've connected with a ragtag ecumenical Christian contingent in the 10 days leading up to the Day of Action.

As we walk along, one of our members pops into a nearby field which is lined with pear trees and comes back with an armful of fruit, which she distributes. I take a bite of my pear. It's close to ripe. The man walking beside me calmly asks 'do you think that you should be eating fruit from someone else's tree?'

'Well, she gave it to me' I say, feeling a bit affronted.

'Ah,' he says, thoughtfully. 'That's what Adam said'.

Oh, I thought to myself. That WAS what Adam said. How come it was so easy for me to blame someone else? I don't remember a lot about that day, but that memory sticks out.

I don't think of myself as an unethical person. And I believe that it is not unethical to hop a fence, grab a pear and share with friends. In fact, in Britain we have a specific verb for just such situations - scrumping. And, I think there's a reasonable Biblical argument that I could have responded with - but the point is, I didn't go into those arguments. My instinctive reaction, as soon as I was hit with the suggestion that I might have done something unethical, was to deflect it onto someone else.

'She gave it to me!' Just like Adam, in the Garden of Eden, snitching on Eve as soon as God checked in on them. Turns out, men have been doing this for so long that the original author and all the translators, tellers, and interpreters ever since have said 'yup, that checks out'.

What was that unconscious reflex to dodge taking blame? How did I learn it? How does it interact with my gender identity and other identities? And, to continue the question we are asking in our preaching 'what is being revealed'?

Some of you will have heard of the Enneagram, which is a variously-attributed and endlessly discussed tool for exploring personal spiritual identity. Mennonite Church Eastern Canada decided that I should be thinking about it, and sent me a book on it, so I have been reading about it recently. The Enneagram suggests that there are nine interconnected personality types, numbered 1-9. Years ago, I heard a story from one of my neighbours in the former Toronto Catholic Worker Community. The community had a retreat at the Centre for Action and Contemplation with Father Richard Rohr, who is well known as a spiritual director and Enneagram teacher.

When the group arrived they were bursting to get on with some political action against local nuclear weapons testing and US militarism. No no, said Richard. This is the Centre for Action and Contemplation. But since you're all activists, you're going to do some contemplation while you are here. And he showed them the Enneagram, the nine types with their descriptions.

All the Toronto Catholic Workers looked at the list and said 'there is is, number 9 - the Peacemaker. That's who we are'. They all wanted to be peacemakers.

And Richard said, 'ah, no. It's nice that you all want to be peacemakers, but we're not going to be looking at number 9. We're going to look at numbers 1 and 2, the Reformer and the Helper.' Because Catholic Workers are usually Enneagram 1s or 2s.

Now, you've got to understand, this was not an insult. The numbers don't imply any greater or lesser significance, it's not better or worse to 9 than a 1. Richard explained that Catholic Worker types generally were focused on trying to fix the world, and trying to help other people. The Enneagram suggests that the way people interact with the world flows from their individual, particular forms of inner brokenness. It identifies nine core wounds, also called vices, or sins, and the ways that people attempt to respond with particular strategies.

It would have been a waste of time for the people on that retreat to focus their attention on the Peacemaker type. Their teacher knew that they needed to hear a different message.

When I preach, when any of us preaches, I am preaching to three specific people. First of all I preach to myself. I am responsible for my own perspective, and for interpreting the Word of God through my own life. Being asked to preach is being asked to share, in part, from that experience. In my case that's the privileged, Northern Hemispherical life of a white, Christian, cisgender man. That means I might not speak to your specific situation. That's okay. We are blessed with different preachers, and many ways to engage the Word. Sermon feedback!

The second person I am preaching to is all of us, it is the congregation as a whole. I'm responsible for interpreting the Word of God with you all. This congregation has a culture, it has hangups and blind spots and quirks. If you aren't hearing yourself addressed as a member of this congregation, let's be curious about why that is. It might be because you've got a wider

perspective or different experience individually than we do collectively. In any case, God calls us to share what we know. Sermon feedback!

The third person I am preaching to is you, individually. And that is the part I have the least control over. If anything I say speaks to you, to your soul, if it brings you truth, then the mystery is that it's not because I know truth. It is a truth that the Holy Spirit is revealing by her work within you. If I'm preaching a different sermon than you are hearing - that's okay. Sermon feedback!

Preaching is a ministry of the church, to the church. One voice speaks, but we are all responsible for hearing, filtering, testing and implementing. Which is one way of saying that I welcome sermon feedback! What is being revealed? Tell me. Later.

What did you hear being revealed in the reading from the book of Ezekiel? Remember that proverb, God asks - the one about how the parents have eaten sour candy but the children are the ones whose teeth hurt? Stop saying that! You should know that people aren't responsible for the wrong things that their parents and ancestors did.

I was conflicted when I first read these verses in preparation for speaking today. Much of what is being revealed in our world today is the harm caused by abuses that have persisted for generations. The genocidal racism that was present in the foundation of the settler nations of Canada and the United States is being played out in the daily humiliations of racism, the theft of land and water, the cycle of authorized violence against individual people of colour - Breonna Taylor's killers found not guilty, sixty-five years to the day after Emmett Till's killers walked free.

Today and on Wednesday we're wearing Orange Shirts to remember and honour the victims of Canada's Residential School System. Meanwhile, Settler Canadians are proposing re-establishing Residential Schools because Mi'kmaq lobster fishers are exercising their legally established right to fish.

The same violences, the same iniquities. And mounting acquisition of wealth and power as the generations roll on, as climate change makes parts of the planet uninhabitable, and new generations are born as refugees, or as fighters, or as pacified and numb consumers.

Reading these words of Ezekiel, I thought 'is this really the message we need right now? Telling people that they are off the hook for what happened before we were born?' Surely we need to double down, to insist on responsibility, restitution, reparation. I brought my conflict in prayer to God, and in study to the words of the wise.

Ezekiel is speaking to those who claim that God is unfair. Perhaps because the world is unfair - evil people get rich, righteous people get taken advantage of, vulnerable people get ignored, disappeared, or administered. Then, as now, the rich have plenty of ways to justify their riches, untroubled by critical thinking: The poor are lazy, or stealing, or addicted, or morally corrupt.

While the rich are naturally gifted, hard working, anointed by God, hashtag blessed. Spiritually abusive circular logic.

Ezekiel tells them, and tells us too, that God's justice is scrupulously fair. We are each judged based on how we live our lives, not on the conditions that were handed down to us.

I'll say that again.

Here is a call for patient discernment. It still matters if you inherited stolen wealth, or if you inherited poisoned land. It matters for how you conduct your life. But it does not determine your judgement. Ezekiel prophesies that you are not blessed because of your material success, nor cursed and punished because you suffer in your life.

God holds all of us in the same compassionate embrace, the same insistent question - how have you lived? God says:

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

Ezekiel 18:31-32

We know that this is a call for patient discernment, because Jesus continues to work with this in his generation. Jesus calls everyone, rich, poor, educated, outcast and foreigner, and they all experience this call differently. When Jesus calls the rich they are forgiven of their sins. They accept forgiveness by redistributing their wealth. When Jesus calls the marginalized, their sins are also forgiven. Jesus doesn't tell the poor they have nothing to be forgiven of. He holds them to the same standard, treats them with the same respect, and offers the same grace.

Don't get me wrong. It matters what you inherited, and what privileges you bear. Those facts are very important. Your economic status, your personal safety, your psychological wellbeing, are all impacted. But none of these determine your soul's destiny. Your allegiance to God is not determined by the good or the evil that your parents did, or that was done to them.

The Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Bunim, says:

The sins which we commit, these are not our great crime. Temptation is powerful, and our strength is slight. The great crime of humanity is that we can turn at any moment, and do not do so.

So here's **The Good News** - it's meant to be at the end of the sermon, but we're only halfway, so listen up.

Your sins are forgiven. Whatever they are. Sins of the rich, the privileged, the powerful. Sins of the marginalized and poor, the historically plundered. God's outrageous grace is for everyone. And the path of Jesus leads us through that grace.

If you're not so sure about that, if you're not feeling that, or if you want to know more about what all of that means - well, that's welcome sermon feedback too, but maybe more of a pastoral conversation. We can have that conversation.

Forgiveness is the re-start. Each time you accept forgiveness, your life continues. You still pay your bills, or struggle to. You get in arguments and make decisions of varying wisdom. You have flashes of insight and long days of confusion.

What you lose is the right not to care.

- You stop being able to say *'that's someone else's problem'*.
- You don't get to say *'you're too bitter and angry, you need to calm down'*.
- You don't get to say *'that's all in the past, get over it'*.
- You can't even say *'I'm just a useless white guy, don't ask me.'*
- You don't get to say *'well, she gave it to me. It's her fault'*.

Instead, that sentence becomes *'she gave it to me, and this is what I am going to do with it, with God's help'*.

The church is a community where we support one another's choice not to deflect, ignore, or forget when we are tempted to. Not to diminish other people's experiences and pain. To choose to step into pain and discomfort, instead of turning away.

A few months ago I read an article about the history of Antisemitism in and around Mennonite communities and institutions in Europe and North America, especially during the Second World War and the years following. As I read and pondered, I heard again and again the little voice inside me saying:

- 'yes, but Peter, you're not really a Mennonite'*.
- 'Peter, it's not fair to expect people in the past to know what you know.'*
- 'Peter, real Mennonites wouldn't act that way...'*
- 'Peter, the people you care about will be hurt if you explore this.'*

I have no trouble finding reasons to distance myself from uncomfortable situations. And yet. I chose to attend this Mennonite congregation. I formally joined, and now have accepted a call to minister with you all. It means that I'm both required and allowed to take a stance on some of these issues. It means I've got a stake here, I've chosen to get involved.

**Remember the Good News?! I'm forgiven!** God is not going to condemn me for the Antisemitism tangled in and amongst Mennonite cultures and institutions. But I will need to answer her about what I did with what I know. How did I work to disentangle, to heal and release? I start by seeing and rejecting my options to disengage, my temptation to look away.

[Christian Peacemaker Teams](#) maintains a list of ['Distancing Behaviours - games we play to impede progress in undoing racism'](#). It names the mostly unconscious methods that people of privilege use to avoid acknowledging the realities of racism, and their own roles in them.

I've already shared some of them with you, salted throughout this sermon, drawn from my own life.

*'Well, she gave it to me'*. A game I played to redirect judgement away from me, onto someone else. A way to avoid feeling the discomfort that I did something wrong.

*'You're too bitter and angry, you need to calm down'*. Demanding a certain emotional presence of people before you take their emotions seriously. It's a perfect way to continue to ignore the realities of people afflicted by things that don't affect me.

*'Peter, you're not really a Mennonite'* - a distancing game I can play when there are parts of being a Mennonite that I don't want to associate with. I know that this one is bunk when I see secular people who claim Mennonite heritage doing reconciliation work.

What are some of the other games we play to distance ourselves?

The Geography Game

The 'I Don't See Colour' Game

The 'We Have a Black President' Game

The Instant Solution Game

**The Geography Game** - whatever is at stake, it's always a bigger problem somewhere else. Racism is a US American problem. Or if you're in the USA, it's a Southern problem. Or if you're in the South, it's a Georgia problem. It's always a problem somewhere else - it's a rural problem if you're living in cities, it's an urban problem if you're in the country.

**The 'I Don't See Colour' Game** - which I win by ignoring difference, saving me from hearing the truth of people who experience racism.

**The 'We Have a Black President' Game** - Racism isn't over because of representative changes.

**The Instant Solution Game** - jumping into campaign mode. It's important to implement solutions, but not as an attempt to avoid deeper reflection. Action and contemplation coexist.

There are plenty more, and the list is always growing. What are some of the games that you have played, or have had played on you, as a tool of distancing?

- 'You've Come a Long Way, Baby' Game
- The 'They don't like me' Game
- 'Racism isn't the only problem' Game
- 'It Happened In The Past' Game
- 'I'm Learning About Their Culture' Game
- 'After I Become a Millionaire' Game
- Find the Racist Game

- Distinguished Lecturer Game
- Black Expert Game
- Definition Game
- Maintain Niceness Game
- Why Can't We All Just Get Along Game

In just a few minutes exploring this with the Youth this morning, we came up with two new suggestions:

- The 'I have a Black Friend' Game
- The 'It's Purely Black-and-White' Game - ignoring the experiences of Non-Black People of Colour and Indigenous People

In my own life, I think about three special games I am tempted to play:

- I'm A Good White Person Game - I'm not like those Bad White People.
- I'm Just an Ignorant White Person Game - What do I know about racism? I should just keep out of it, or I'll do something wrong.
- I'm a CPTer Game - I've done the training, I know the lingo, therefore I must know what I'm talking about.

How do you respond to these games?

1. First, become aware of them, and see how they function, how they pop up in thought or conversation.
2. Second, wonder what it is you are trying to avoid thinking or feeling. You might journal alone or discuss with a trusted friend who is open to talking you through this.
3. Thirdly, experiment with what you might say instead. Is it better to refrain from taking up space? Is there an insight that it is important to share? Is there a way to make safer space for racialized people to lead the conversation?

My dear friends

I show you this candle. I don't know where it came from originally, but it has been through several moves. You can probably see this lump on the side. At one time a hole melted and a bunch of wax flowed out. I scooped it up and pasted it on the side to close the hole. So this candle is pretty lumpy. It is in a tin mug that's starting to rust a bit at the bottom. I used to bang on the bottom of the tin cup with a fork when my neighbours used to come out to make noise to show support for healthcare workers, and a bit of the enamel chipped off, and it's rusting slowly. This candle does not look great. But when our power failed a week ago, it did just fine to carry a flame.

We are battered and broken. We inherit pain and trauma, we inherit corrupting power and toxic expectations. To God's eyes, we don't look so great. But God doesn't keep us around because we look great. We can hold a light. But when Christ is in our midst, we can carry a flame. When power fails, the fire of God can still illuminate enough to get along, to see the next step, the next prayer and the next.

I think a lot about ethical behaviour, about the struggle for justice and the need for deep deep restoration and salvation of our political and social institutions. My friends, I know that many of you do as well. As we look at what is being revealed in this present shadow, as we listen for the Holy Spirit, I want to remind you of the rock on which we build. There is a lot of theological language - we are saved, redeemed, forgiven, liberated, raised into new life, born again from above.

Don't let the language get in the way. We are made right with God, with our source of life. We didn't do anything to deserve it, any more than we deserved the hardships that each of us face, or the happiness that each of us finds. We just chose to answer God's invitation, first to face the truth of our situation, and then to orient our efforts towards new and abundant life.

"Turn, then, and live". Amen.

#### Questions

Explore the list of 'Games'. Based on the names, can you imagine what these games are, or how they function to distract from anti-racist thought and action?

When have you experienced someone distract or deflect your experience, when you tried to share it?

How have you tried to be responsible for the things you inherited - positive or negative? Have you ever worried about your relationship with God because of these things?