

Temples and Pipelines

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Text: Mark 12:28 – 13:8

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Today, we read the third in a trio of stories from Mark in which Jesus condemns an unjust system and proclaims the coming of the kingdom. Let me refresh your memory of this narrative.

Two weeks ago, we heard a story that is, on the surface, about the importance of loving one's neighbour. A scribe asks Jesus what is the single most important of all the Jewish laws. Jesus answers the question by linking together the commandments to "love God with all your heart and soul" and to "love your neighbour as yourself." And, he adds for emphasis, "there is no commandment greater than these."

Theologians say that this is a strange pairing, for while contemporary rabbis emphasized the importance of both these commandments, they aren't found that close to each other in the actual texts. So Jesus was effectively reframing rabbinic teachings. The scribe agrees with Jesus that: "to love God with all the heart ... and to love one's neighbour as oneself – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And Jesus, to borrow a phrase from today's political advertising, appears to "approve this message."

But in his classic text on Mark, Binding the Strong Man, Ched Myers concludes that what Jesus means by saying that the scribe is "not far from the kingdom of God" is that while he intellectually grasps what Jesus is saying, the scribe is, in fact, not close enough. He remains committed to the orthodoxy, and the orthodoxy remains committed, as the rest of chapter 12 demonstrates, to a temple system of worship that enriches its priests and robs the poor of what little coin they have, not to mention their dignity.

What do I mean by this? Last week, we had the story of the widow's mite, which follows immediately after the incident with the scribe. This text is often portrayed as a testament to piety of the poor:

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Myers sees this instead as a condemnation of a temple system that demands such a sacrifice of the poor woman, and indeed as we move ahead to today, we find that immediately after saying these words, Jesus exits the temple and tells his disciples, "Do

you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." In other words, the temple will fall.

Put these three stories together and you get a pretty strong condemnation of the status quo, a temple system which to Jesus' frame of mind valued priestly authority over community; ritual and symbolism over good works; recognition of status and wealth over justice for the poor and oppressed.

It's kind of like prorogations of legislatures and omnibus bills rather than parliamentary debate; millions for war bicentennials rather than increased social welfare spending on reserves; tax cuts to fossil fuel corporations rather than investment in conservation and sustainable energy projects.

Sound familiar?

What, you might ask, are we then required to do as followers of the man who asked probing questions of those in power, who in this story challenged power itself in direct action?

What are we to do in light of one of the biggest issues facing Canada today: the proposed expansion or construction of a series of pipelines to transport crude oil and bitumen from the ever expanding tar sands project in Northern Alberta. This includes Kinder Morgan's proposed twinning of the Trans Canada pipeline from Alberta to Vancouver, and Enbridge's reversal of Pipeline 9 from Sarnia to Montreal, both to carry crude oil from the tar sands. It also includes TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL to the Gulf Coast, and Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline to the BC Coast, both of which would carry unprocessed bitumen. I want to talk to you today about Northern Gateway.

Our church, the United Church of Canada, has a clear position on the pipeline. And while there is no common ecumenical position, it is an issue which KAIROS believes raises serious ethical and theological questions that all followers of Jesus should take up.

What is the scope of the pipeline? If Enbridge gets approval to build it, Northern Gateway will run almost 1200 km from the tar sands in Northern Alberta to Kitimat BC. Each day it would carry 525,000 barrels of bitumen to BC. Bitumen is a form of unprocessed fossil fuel whose consistency is akin to a viscous hockey puck. It requires a chemical mix to make it flow, so every day the pipeline would also carry almost 200,000 barrels of condensate back to Alberta.

What's at stake? Given the nature of pipelines, there are obvious questions about spills – and much of the area through which the pipeline will travel is pristine wilderness. It crosses the migratory path of birds and wildlife and traverses more than 700 bodies of water, including rivers full of spawning salmon.

There is the question of what happens to the bitumen once it leaves the pipeline for shipment overseas. Supertankers would have to transport the fuel through deep and dangerous channels, including the Hecate Strait, which is considered one of the world's riskiest bodies of water in terms of navigation. There is the question of what happens when –not if, but when– a tanker sinks or runs aground in these passages, the coasts of which are home to an abundance of sea life including oysters, clams, and sea urchins.

There is also the question of what the pipeline means, ecologically speaking, for Alberta. KAIROS and its member churches adopted the position in 2009 that there should be no new approvals of tar sands projects. Currently, pipelines from the tar sands are capable of carrying 3.8 million barrels a day – almost exactly what is now produced [1.9 mbd] and projected from already approved projects [1.8 mbd]. The construction of Northern Gateway implies the approval of new tar sands projects, and all the environmental consequences that go with it.

These are not insignificant for an industry that, even as it tries to be more ecologically responsible, still uses between 2.5 and 4 barrels of water for every barrel of oil it produces, uses as much natural gas a day as would heat more than 5 million Canadian homes, and leaves behind massive waste: piles of coke and sulfur, and enormous tailings ponds that will take up to 40 years to be reclaimed, and then to a markedly different form than the original terrain.

And of course there are global ecological questions, particularly around climate change. Tar sands production is the most greenhouse gas (GHG) intensive form of energy production that we have. GHGs, such as carbon dioxide, are the emissions which contribute to global climate change. In its full life cycle from extraction through to the tailpipe of our cars, tar sands oil emits 10-30% more GHGs than any other fossil fuel. Canada's current emissions reduction plan for 2020 calls on us to reduce GHG emissions by 94 megatonnes annually. Yet if Northern Gateway operates at full capacity, it will be adding product worth 82 megatonnes of CO₂ annually.

What about people? Who is or will be affected? How? There are positive impacts. The tar sands provide jobs to people from across Canada, including from my home province of Newfoundland. I have family who have worked there. When I visited Fort McMurray, I met people who lived around the corner from where I grew up in Corner Brook, who went to the same schools I did. So I get the jobs thing,

The tar sands contribute to our national economy – though we know, as citizens of a manufacturing province, that the oil-based strength of our dollar is not an unconditional good. And it is true that First Nations in Alberta benefit from oil jobs. However, as I was told by a community leader from Fort Chipewyan, they have not seen much upward mobility in those jobs over the last 40 years. They remain in the lower echelon of oil industry jobs while at the same time seeing great loss in their traditional ways of life – traplines and migratory paths interrupted by the tar sands projects, wild animals which

when butchered for food show signs of illness, fish with tumours, ducks killed in tailings ponds. They are not sure any more that this is an acceptable trade-off. In fact, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation is taking Shell to court over its proposed expansion of the Jackpine mine for precisely this reason.

As for Northern Gateway, Enbridge estimates that it would create over 62,000 person-years of employment during construction and more than 1000 full-time jobs once it is completed. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives finds only 8,600 person-years of employment, and 217 permanent jobs. And what about existing jobs that might be lost or negatively impacted? There are 35,000 fishing and tourism jobs on the BC coast that would potentially be affected by a spill.

More than 200 First Nations communities along the pipeline's path and the BC coast now stand to be affected if Northern Gateway goes through. And as in Alberta, it is not simply a question of human communities, but of entire ecosystems rich with animals, plants, and waterways. And just as First Nations in Alberta have expressed their concern, so too have First Nations in British Columbia, in the Save the Fraser Gathering of Nations and the Coastal First Nations Declaration.

But I want to share with you the particular contribution of our Indigenous sisters and brothers in BC Native Ministries. Their intervention at General Council this summer is now the policy of our church. I will read it at some length:

As First Nations members of the United Church of Canada, we are called upon to look after and honour all the gifts of the Creator, and to pass along these gifts in turn to our children. We are united in our belief that this project and others like it will do a disproportionate amount of direct harm to the life-sustaining air, food, and water that we all share on Earth.

... This pipeline threatens the air we breathe. Everything that lives also breathes, and we share this resource as equals....

... This pipeline threatens to poison the food we eat as peoples who live off the land. The plants, animals, and fish that come from these lands will share our suffering. As First Nations we hold feasts to honour our ancestors and to carry forward our traditions. ...The spirits of our ancestors feast with us during these ceremonies, and enjoy the same foods that were familiar to them during their own lifetimes. This ritual must remain pure because it represents our connection to the past.

... This pipeline threatens to poison the water we drink and the sea where we cast our nets. This precious resource is the giver of life, but some sins do not wash away. Within Prince Rupert Presbytery, the Turtle Point burial ground is contaminated by the shipwreck of The Queen of the

North. *This wreck and others like it on the coast of British Columbia foul the surrounding marine life with poisons.... First Nations communities continue to suffer from these costly mistakes and live in fear of even larger ones to come because the rivers, lakes, and the Pacific Ocean directly sustain us culturally and economically. Unique creatures such as the Spirit Bear take fish from the same waters as we do. Threatened species and endangered whales call these waters home. The salmon swim far up into the rivers of the interior, bringing food to last the people through the long winter. The eagles will still fly overhead and bear witness to our deeds....*

In every corner of this vast Presbytery the food allows us to feast and celebrate our culture and our heritage. The plants and animals that represent our stories, families, clans, and houses, are the sacred beings and forces at the foundation of our spirituality and traditions from time immemorial

This is how we understand the bond between Heaven and Earth, ourselves and our Creator.

Without air, food, and water together as one in our bodies, we can have no life, no culture, no language, and no religion. To diminish these in any way is also to diminish our bond with the sacred and the divine.

This is a rich teaching, and I am not surprised by the impact it had at General Council, which was to ensure passage of a resolution opposing the Northern Gateway pipeline.

I think that we have much to learn from traditional Indigenous teachings, as well as from the Judeo-Christian texts that continue to inform our thoughts each Sunday and, I hope, our actions every other day of the week.

And so this brings me back to our text these last three weeks -- to Mark's emphasis in the first on treating our neighbour as ourselves. Who is our neighbour if not the peoples with whom we share this land? As a covenant people, what is our responsibility to them? Not to try and mold them into our likeness as we did in the residential schools era, but rather to build right relationships built on mutuality and respect. In which treaties, nation-to-nation relationships, and international instruments like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are respected and fully implemented.

Last week we heard the story of a system that demanded of its most vulnerable, a widow, "all that she had to live on." BC Native Ministries' submission to General Council makes it very clear that that is what Canada is asking of them if it allows Northern Gateway to go through. This is what we are asking of Creation itself. The simple truth is that how we treat the vulnerable and how we treat the breadth of Creation is a

reflection of our faithfulness to God. Our dedication to God's justice compels us to see how our actions –as individuals, as communities, as churches, and as a nation– impact other communities, human and non-human.

Do we want to continue to prop up a system that demands such sacrifice, or do we want to participate in bringing down those stones?

It's a bit trite to ask you "what would Jesus do?" in light of the Northern Gateway pipeline and the vulnerable communities in its path. So instead I will ask you, in light of the position that our church has taken up, "what is our responsibility to this Jesus, the Jesus of Mark, in this time and this place?"

Amen.