

11-1-2008

Social engagement: risk and love

Rebekah Eckert

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Eckert, Rebekah (2008) "Social engagement: risk and love," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss1/12>

This Sermons is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Social Engagement: Risk and Love¹

Rebekah Eckert

*Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada
Lethbridge, Albert*

Texts: 2 Kings 5:1-15; John 13:1, 3-5, 12-15

After the end of a long day I sometimes like to relax by reading children's books. They have three advantages over adult fiction: they're often funny, I can finish one in an evening, and they are usually infused with hope, not despair.

So I got to thinking, after I read one recently, how might some of these fictional childhood characters react to present crises? How would Anne of Green Gables respond to climate change? How would the Paper Bag Princess tackle child poverty? And what would Jacob Two-Two say to Ralph Klein?²

I laugh at these questions, but I'm half serious. Our present models of social engagement haven't taken me far enough. I don't know how to solve these problems. As Elizabeth May (former head of the Sierra Club of Canada, practicing Anglican, and now Green Party of Canada leader) says in her excellent book, *How to Save the World in Your Spare Time*, "Politics has been described as 'the art of the possible.' It is all about compromise and balancing interests. Never make the mistake of thinking the role of the citizen activist is the same. Our role is the art of the *impossible*."³

So what are we to do? One thing these childhood heroes share in abundance is the courage and daring to tackle the impossible. Rachel Lynde, the fire-breathing dragon, and the Hooded Fang are not exactly pushovers!

Nor is Naaman, of whom we heard in our first reading, a pushover. As the major warrior for the king of Aram, he shows decided antipathy to following the prophet Elijah's advice to wash in the river Jordan. And yet the person who mustered up the courage to get him even to consider seeking this healing is the little nameless slave girl. She had five counts against her: she is a slave, female, young, poor, a foreigner. All reasons not to venture a word out of place. Yet in her boldness she speaks the words that lead to Naaman's transformation, literally and figuratively.

I'd like to be as daring in our work. Others have said as much, too. In a recent article in *Alberta Views* magazine, Stephen Legault raises ten questions to challenge Alberta's environmental movement. Bluntly he says,

Press releases and media events [alone] won't cut it. We have to ... find ... vehicles for telling our story so that the public recognizes it as their own. We can't communicate from behind our desks. We have to go to churches, to chambers of commerce, to community forums, pool rooms, coffee shops, town halls, cinemas.⁴

In other words, we'll have to come out of our familiar, safe strategies, and find new, daring ways to communicate. Or, as Toronto social activist Darren O'Donnell argues, "inspiring strangers to talk to one another will create positive social change, despite and because of the resulting anxiety and discomfort this may cause."⁵ Not preaching to the choir; more like converting your adversary.

I haven't seen too much success with this in the last while — perhaps because we've been preaching to the choir. I have been part of the social justice scene in Alberta for over twenty years, now — more than half my life — and I have seen us social activists lose battle after battle with the environmental and social bloodsuckers of the province. There have been a few successes — on the municipal and international fronts particularly — but the marches, the letters, the organizing have not been enough even to resolve the land dispute of the Lubicon Cree,⁶ much less stave off climate change.

But what the slave girl teaches us, what children's book heroes teach us, what Legault and O'Donnell and May remind us of, is that risk is worth it. If you love deeply, you'll also risk all. If you refuse to risk, you're also refusing love. The stakes are high ... maybe higher than they've ever been before. When we open ourselves, create new ways to communicate, risk it all — alongside that will come others or our own healing and opened hearts.

Jesus' washing the disciples' feet is another example of that daring risk. There are a lot of lovely qualities to Jesus' act — an example of servanthood, his great love for his friends, his word "made flesh," embodied love, John's Gospel's version of the Eucharist — all wonderful. Yet today I want to underline Jesus' risk. Knowing this group of his beloved would likely run away at the first sign of the arresting soldiers, knowing these friends will, in human terror, flee for their lives and abandon him to his fate, nevertheless he

strips off his tunic, pours the water, kneels at their feet. He tenderly cleanses those who will leave him to die alone.

Ideally, of course, we too would be like Jesus. In that *Alberta Views* environmental article I mentioned earlier, the author even names such love as central: “Too often, advocates act out of anger and fear for what is being lost. Until we are able to act out of compassion for one another and love for what remains, we will never gain ground, at best hold ground, and much too often lose ground.”⁷ Yet as Jesus’ disciples knew, you don’t get love and compassion just by wanting to be so. You don’t get it by great inner resolve, toughening your guts into an impenetrable force, trying to be the best darn social activist there ever was. You get it as Jesus got it: by knowing he had come from God and was going to God. It’s right there in the text: Jesus, knowing he had come from God and was going to God, then proceeds to wash the disciples’ feet. He knew who he was, and whom he belonged to, and to whom his future belonged.

And this is Jesus’ gift to us: because of Jesus, we know who *we* are. We too have come from God and are going to God. We know who we are: the beloved of God, and whom we belong to, and to whom our future belongs.

And that news is an opened door into the freedom of life — a life freed to love deeply and risk deeply. Jesus flings wide the door and calls us in — to live life to the full, to risk all for such abundant life.

May it be so among us. Amen.

Notes

- 1 This sermon was given to the KAIROS Prairie Regional Meeting, Alberta, on 17 September 2006. KAIROS is a Canadian ecumenical justice initiative group.
- 2 Mr. Ralph Klein is the past premier of the province of Alberta.
- 3 Key Porter Books, 2006, pp. 34-35.
- 4 Stephen Legault, “Ten Questions for Environmentalists,” *Alberta Views*, July/August 2006, Vol. 9, No. 6: 33.
- 5 Review of *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance, and Utopia* by Darren O’Donnell (Coach House, 2006) by Zoe Whittall, *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Saturday 24 June 2006, p. D7.
- 6 The Lubicon Cree is a First Nation in Alberta which has been engaged in land rights efforts for many years.
- 7 Legault: 35.