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## Dignity Matters

Wall Street United Church

July 6<sup>th</sup> 2025

**Luke 10:1-12** - *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way; I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if a person of peace is there, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.*

It’s summer and I’m currently reading **James**, which is a wonderful novel that I recommend. Written by Percival Everett, it is a re-imagined tale of *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, written from the perspective of the slave Jim. It has won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a whole bunch of other awards. You don’t have to have read *Huckleberry Finn* to appreciate the book, though you’ll likely enjoy it even more if you have. The boy Huck, who’s about 13, and the slave Jim are both running away from abuse and slavery and are traveling the Mississippi in hopes of finding freedom and new life.

At the same time, I’m also immersed in the current news — things like the horrible “Alligator Alcatraz.” They built this massive detention centre in the Florida

Everglades, and Trump is just revelling in this facility where no one can escape because of the snakes and alligators.

Somehow all of this reminded me of an article I read by Dr. Donna Hicks when I was doing my doctoral studies. I can't remember most of what I read during my studies, but this was an article that stuck with me.

Dr. Hicks has worked extensively in her career with high level conflict between different groups of people. She worked on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in Sri Lanka where she brought Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim communities together for dialogue. She's worked on the Northern Ireland conflict and on improving Cuba U.S. relations. She was the Deputy Director of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard University.

One of the things she noticed in her work and studies was that we tend to approach world conflicts with our head. We propose logical solutions and work to get each side to find some common ground. For example, the 2-State solution is often used as a solution to the Middle East conflict. Instead of one state, Israel, one proposed solution is that we (the world) recognize that there are two states and two countries: Israel and Palestine. Then you work at figuring out the logistics and borders of each of these states — which is far from easy, because while you have Gaza in the southwest, you also have the West Bank farther north and east that looks like Swiss cheese, thanks to so many illegal Israeli settlements! But when Hicks would work on these high-level conflicts, she was continually struck that it wasn't the complexity of the solutions that kept derailing talks — it was not that they didn't agree on this fact or that fact related to a proposed solution — it was that people's strong emotions on both sides would erupt and disrupt the process.

She realized that instead of avoiding the emotions in the room, those emotions were the key to helping groups navigate peace. Easier said than done! She was once doing work in Columbia between government officials and civilian leaders, including some guerrilla leaders. The tension in the room after decades of civil war was so high ... and yet she knew that sitting them down and asking them to talk about their feelings wasn't going to fly! So instead of doing the workshop on effective communication as she had planned and was requested, she explained to

the group that she believed that on both sides, dignity had been violated, and she wanted to pivot to work through issues of dignity. All of a sudden, she had everyone's attention in the room! She wrote in the article that: "One of the most resistant and unapproachable generals in the room, who had refused to look me in the eye for two days, came up to me and said, "Donna, I want to thank you. Not only did you help the relationships in this room — I think you also saved my marriage!"

Dr. Hicks had been studying the concept of dignity as something that might help get to the bottom of some of the most entrenched conflicts. This was the day that what came to be called "The Dignity Model" was born.

Dr. Hicks defines dignity as *"an internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things."* To put it more simply, dignity is about a person's inherent value and worth. It is also about our inherent vulnerability.

Dignity is something we are born with. Every human is born with dignity and has dignity, even if they don't act like it. Respect is different. We often confuse dignity and respect. You may not respect someone, and their actions may not deserve respect. Respect is earned; dignity is inherent — it's a birthright. It's like that illustration where you take a \$50 bill and you ask if anyone wants it — and of course everyone does! And then you crumple up the bill and ask "But who wants it now?" And everyone still does. And then you dust it with dirt and ask if anyone still wants it. And they still do! Why? Because the value is still there! It's still \$50! This is what dignity is like and it's true of every human — we have worth and value because of who we are.

However, we are not always treated with the dignity that we are due. Our dignity is violated when others do not treat us like we have value.

Humans are highly, highly aware of when their dignity has been violated. In fact, studies show that when our dignity is violated, the same part of the brain is activated as when we receive a physical injury. The brain reads this in almost the same way. My guess is that most of you can recall a time when you felt your dignity

violated. These moments are often associated with feeling shamed or deeply offended. When Dr. Hicks was working with high level officials and the strong emotions would flare that underneath, she realized that what they were really saying was: *“How dare you treat us this way! Don’t you see we’re suffering? Don’t you see our community is suffering? Can’t you see that we are human beings?”*

When Hicks started to bring the issue of the dignity to the table, everyone had a story about their dignity violations. The stories just kept coming — not only stories about themselves, but stories about their communities and stories about their ancestors’ dignity violations. They came to the table carrying the burden of their ancestors’ dignity.

I hope you can see and understand a little bit why the slavery in the U.S. or the colonization and mistreatment of indigenous people in Canada is not just history. Every small and large act of systemic or personal racism renews the injury. Or how daily acts of indignity, like having to line up for hours at check points in the occupied territories of the West Bank, can fester and grow into something violent. As you might imagine, dignity violations perpetuate dignity violations.

The first words in the scripture that Michel read are *“after this”*—*“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.”* After what? Just few verses before, Jesus and his disciples went to stay in a Samaritan town. And the text says: *“they did not receive him.”* James and John are incensed! They ask Jesus “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down and consume them?” (Which is just a tad funny — maybe they are conjuring their inner Elijah with whom we hung out last week! I’m not sure how it is that they think they have that kind of power, but hey, it’s the thought that counts!) But it is clear that they are angry — red hot angry! This is a clear dignity violation moment, and one that likely stems from previous dignity violations on the other side. Jews did not respect or like Samaritans, and the feeling was very mutual. Jesus doesn’t take the disciples up on their offer commanding fire, but instead rebukes them, and they move on to another village.

But having just experienced a dignity violation in Samaria, you'd think Jesus would be leery of going to places like that. Maybe he and his disciples should stick closer to home from now on, so they don't get hurt, so they are not tempted to command fire to consume the perpetrators! But instead, Jesus sends out the 70 and tells them what to do if they are welcomed, and what to do if they are not welcomed. If they are welcomed, they are to tell those around them "The kingdom of God has come near." If they are not welcome, they are to shake the dust off and still tell those around them "The kingdom of God has come near." The message is the same.

Dignity has two parts: inherent value and inherent vulnerability. As a human being, we have both. Jesus knew those he sent out were vulnerable, and he sends them anyway.

What do you do if your or someone else's dignity has been violated? This is where I would jump to the **Fourfold Path of Forgiveness**. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful, life changing Christian principles and ways to live. What do you do? 1. You name the violation. 2. You tell the story. 3. You choose to forgive. 4. You renew or release the relationship.

It's very simple, and incredibly difficult. I think that little ritual of wiping off the dust from their feet was a way of forgiving — not condoning bad behaviour, but setting yourself free from the grip and poison of anger, revenge, and retaliation.

The 70 followers of Jesus return and come with reports of great joy of seeing demons destroyed and the power of the evil one thrown down. Why? Because they dared to risk rejection, and worse. And they dared to go out and see the value in humans and to tell them the good news of the kingdom of God — that God loves and values them, and offers another way of living.

If we look at the ministry of Jesus through the lens of dignity, we see how Jesus treated everyone with dignity. He saw people. He saw the real Matthew, instead of a tax collector. He saw the Samaritan woman at the well, instead of whatever her peers were calling her after having had 4 husbands and not being married to the one she was with. He saw the men dying with him on a cross instead of just seeing

criminals.

Jesus and his inner circle knew what it was like to have their dignity violated. Jesus at this point has “*set his face towards Jerusalem*” — towards the ultimate dignity violation, where he will be taunted and tortured — not because he has done wrong, but because he loves too much to follow the rulers’ small-minded systems and rules. He faces this ultimate dignity violation because he knows love is so much more powerful.

Dr. Hicks wrote in her article: “*Left to our own (uneducated) devices, we have created an epidemic of indignity worldwide — species-wide— and we need to do something about it if we are ever going to get at this root cause of human conflict.*”

We often say that we are co-creators with Christ. We are also called to be co-redeemers and co-healers of a broken world. This is something that every one of us can do! It’s something you get to practice when you are serving a Friday Breakfast or Sunday Supper. It’s something you get to practice when a PSW comes to help you or when you are when you are the PSW helping to bathe or listen to an elderly client.

Don’t waste an opportunity to recognize and accept the value and vulnerability of every living thing!

You are human and vulnerable to hurt, violation, and loss in this life, and you are valuable. I can’t help but notice that the word ‘valuable’ includes all living things. Creation, the water, the air, the soil, the porpoises and the pollinators are vulnerable and valuable. When we recognize this, we live differently. We treat others and creation differently. We treat ourselves differently. Love becomes so much deeper and more powerful. Let’s risk going into the world to share God’s transforming love!

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