
A View From Here



Greg Paul

‘They will call him Immanuel – ‘God with us’... an angel, Matthew 1:23

Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Jesus, Matthew 18:20

An old friend came to worship with us recently on a Sunday night.

‘Sheldon’ is a long, rosy native man – he used to be as tough as a twist of rawhide, a wild boy on the streets, but that life has hollowed him out so that now he’s more like a bundle of dry sticks, loosely tied. Most aboriginal people who end up on the streets of our fair city are the ones who’ve endured an assortment of the worst bits of the native experience in Canada: childhood on poverty-stricken reservations, surrounded by alcoholic adults and hopeless teenagers, removal to foster homes or residential schools where they are subject to the predations of other damaged youth or twisted adults, juvenile then adult detention interspersed with long stays on the street. Sheldon’s own heritage has been all this and more.

For years, when we’d meet, I’d greet him and he’d respond with something insulting or threatening. I’d give a little back, and eventually he’d start to smile – a mouthful of rotted stumps beneath a swollen, pitted nose – and laugh a bit, finally asking me how I was doing.

It’s amazing to me that Sheldon and I are friends. It speaks far more to his graciousness than mine: I am white, wealthy and Christian. Most of what he and his people have suffered has been as a result of the actions of people just like me. We have shoved native people onto tracts of land not useful to us (except in some cases where the usefulness of oil, for example, or electricity or lumber became apparent only much later), focused the energy of church and state on eradicating their culture, taken and abused their children under the guise of educating or converting them; and now we throw money at them to keep them tame.

So there is a very real, deeply rooted and largely justified anger at the heart of the verbal ‘abuse’ Sheldon often lays on me when we meet. When he pretends, at first, not to know me, it is more than just a joke. There is a wide, swift river of pain and resentment he must cross to be able to take my hand as friend and brother. He doesn’t pretend it isn’t there. But he does cross it.

Lately, though, he’s dropped even that little routine. He doesn’t run with the bad boys anymore either – he can’t; he’s simply not strong enough. It’s as if all the suffering he’s been through has burned off the layer of anger and resentment that insulated him from people like me, and his weakness has stripped him of the desire to threaten or do violence. The years of alcoholism have damaged his brain and brought him close to death, too, but the net result is a transparency and gentleness that is very sweet.

When he came the other night, he shuffled quietly across the back of the room and sat on the floor, with his back against the wall. After a time, Thea (Sanctuary nurse and fellow-worshipper) got up from her chair and went to join him.

As Annie mentions on the front page article, part of our introduction of communion includes telling people that taking the bread and wine is a way of saying, “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died and rose again for me.” So when Sheldon got up off the floor and tottered toward the table with Thea’s hand under his arm, it was a quietly remarkable moment, a material statement of faith.

When we were done that night, Sheldon stayed behind to talk to me. It wasn’t anything very deep – he just needed shoes. I noticed for the first time that he was wearing a pair of plaid slippers. Hard for anybody to make do with footwear like that in Toronto, in November, but so much more so for someone who, like Sheldon, is homeless.

The two shoe stores on our block were closed already. Returning to Sanctuary, Thea and I looked in the clothing room, and found a pair of cheap but very shiny dress shoes we thought might fit. Sheldon was skeptical at first, but put them on and sat there chuckling at the look of those bright, tapered shoes beneath his tattered sweats. He’s so rickety, and the plastic soles of the shoes were so slippery, that he fell over after he had taken only a few steps. Once he got over the pain, we had a laugh about that too, and I promised that if he came back the next day, I’d buy him some footwear that wouldn’t rub him raw.

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He rang the doorbell when we were part way through our regular staff meeting. Usually we ignore the bell when that happens. If we didn't, we'd never get finished, and I will confess that I resent such interruptions perhaps more than anyone. I had a hunch it might be him, though, and went to check.

Those ridiculous shoes had fairly gleamed the night before, but they now looked like they'd seen a hundred miles of rough road. Most of the bright finish was worn off, revealing that they were made of something that looked very much like cardboard. We laughed again about how crummy they were. He was delighted with the new ones I had ready for him.

The Christmas season is all about the advent of the Christ – his presence in our very midst. His presence as a vulnerable, dependant child. "God with us." "I needed clothes, and you clothed me," Jesus said later, when he had almost come to the end of his life. "...Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

So, yes, an old friend showed up to worship with us the other night. And again the next day. And Sheldon showed up too.
