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Reading: Matthew 11.25-30

The Message: Intractable Problem?

Last week I made a pitch for not trusting experts and considering emotional vulnerability -- widening our hearts to being touched in a new and profound way -- as essential tools for survival -- in avalanche country -- and as a Christian in 21st century Mississauga. It is making ourselves vulnerable that allows us to see Jesus in the people around us. This week I'd like to share with you how making oneself vulnerable as a person of faith can help solve unsolvable problems.

Brenda Zimmerman Professor at the Schulich School of Business at York University was for 29 years my friend, parishioner and mentor in applying complexity science to change in the church. She was attracted to intractable problems: constantly amazed at how seemingly ordinary people could do extraordinary things and solve problems that experts said couldn't be solved, she spent her life lifting up the concepts that she saw being used to solve the unsolvable. Perhaps she can help us as we create a united vision, sense of mission and move toward a new minister and ministry.

Brenda rooted her approach in Matthew 11.

Jesus points out that John the Baptist separated himself from the common life: and he was accused of being a demon. Jesus came "eating and drinking, hanging out with tax collectors and sinners" -- fully engaged in the ordinary life of human beings, he was accused of being a glutton and a drunk. But, he says, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds!" Look to my actions to judge -- not to whether I fit your idea of an acceptable expert.

Jesus listed his deeds: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor receive good news. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Wisdom is proved right -- vindicated -- by her deeds. Unsolvable problems are solved!

Here was a first hint for Brenda -- look to what works. And for her, considered an international expert, she was humbled by this:

"I praise you, God, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

The actions of Jesus show that anything is possible -- even solving the unsolvable -- the intractable social, economic, and ecological problems we face today in our world. But it won't fall to the experts to come up with solutions.

Brenda noticed that ordinary people don't often articulate what they have done. They are too busy with "doing" to take time to reflect. So Brenda spent her life making sense of how people solved intractable problems.

This passage from Matthew convicted Brenda. She came to see that her expertise could make her blind to see God's wisdom in the deeds of the so-called ordinary person. And so, she tells this story to show how she had to become more child-like to recognize Jesus' power in our world.

“My story is about AIDS and Brazil’s approach to dealing with the AIDS epidemic. It is also a story about my analysis and how much I missed by staying expert rather than child-like in my observations.”

In 1997, the World Bank reported that an estimated 30 million people had contracted HIV-AIDS and 90% of those were in developing countries.

AIDS in developing countries is often assumed to be an intractable problem because:

- What we do today will take a generation or two to work, so don’t expect miracles in the short run.
- The poor can’t afford drugs: anti-retrovirals cost \$15 000 per person a year and Brazil’s annual income per capita was less than \$5000. So poor countries should focus on prevention and let the infected die.
- Uneducated patients can’t manage complicated drug regimes.
- Only sophisticated national health care systems will be successful.

In the early 1990s, the World Bank predicted that Brazil would be the AIDS capital of the world by 2000..

- In 1990, Brazil had almost twice as many cases per capita as South Africa. BUT
- In 1996, South Africa’s HIV infection rate was 25% (1 in 4 people) whereas Brazil’s was 0.6% (1 in 160). In 6 years, Brazil turned the tables on this intractable problem.

How?

They didn’t like the experts’ assumptions so they changed the questions.

Brazil refused to accept that the ill should be left to die.

- They asked, “**how can we provide treatment to all who need it now?**”
- They chose to use treatment as part of the prevention strategy.

Brazil used a clause of the World Trade Organization agreement that allows countries to violate patent laws in cases of national emergency. Declaring an infection rate of 25% a national emergency, they fought large pharmaceuticals, the WTO, and the US gov’t and won the right to make generic drugs at less than 10% of the cost which they gave to every AIDS patient for free.

While patients received treatments, they also received information and they spread the prevention ideas in their circles of family and friends.

Instead of assuming the poor were too ignorant to manage their treatment, nurses, NGO workers, volunteers at churches and foodbanks

- drew pictures of the sun or the moon to indicate when meds should be taken, and pictures of food on the labels of the pill bottles if they needed to be consumed with food.
- Worked to link the poorest patients with free food.

In spite of the much higher illiteracy rate in Brazil than in North America, the adherence rate for the drug regime was at the same level. Being illiterate doesn’t mean being stupid. Clearly they could follow complicated drug regimes.

Brenda authored a paper that pointed out how the experts got it wrong. But hear this:

"I realized how flawed my analysis was when I was doing some work at the Canadian Hearing Society and decided to tell this story to help them with their problem.

"At one point, a deaf Board member of the CHS, using a sign language interpreter, asked, "what was it that gave Brazil this perspective and the courage to take on the World Bank, WTO, the pharmaceutical companies and the US government?"

"I gave a few cultural and intellectual explanations of why Brazil did what they did. She clearly wasn't satisfied with this 'expert's' explanation. She then asked, "what role did Christian faith play?"

"I repeated the bit about churches and nuns etc. being part of the volunteer web used. She nodded but then said again, "Ok. But what role did Christian faith play?"

"When you work through an interpreter, time slows down and you can really pause and think about what they said.

"My thought was a highly intellectual - "oops".

"Oops... I knew Brazil as a predominantly Christian country and yet I hadn't really taken Christian faith into consideration. It wasn't lost on me that it took someone who was deaf to make me aware that I had been blind and deaf to some of the obvious aspects of the case. At that moment I felt a bit more child-like than expert.

I confessed that I hadn't really considered Christianity. I had been very aware how important the churches were in providing the resources of trusted volunteers but that was all. I told her that Christianity explained why they were unwilling to accept the experts' answers of letting the poor die without treatment. Brazil's answer was Jesus-like. They opted for a universal program and worked at how to treat the poorest and weakest in society.

"Since then, I have thought about the assumptions that Jesus challenged and continues to challenge. *The meek shall inherit the earth. The poor are blessed.* Over and over the New Testament provides examples of Christ's capacity to flip the dominant rhetoric on its head by posing the opposite.

"I went back to look at the Brazil data again and now that I am looking for it, Christian faith is all over this case. Catholic priests used liberation theology to fight the AIDS epidemic. They argued that the oppressed – the poor, illiterate – do not need experts teaching them their ways. Priests leading bible studies were instrumental in uncovering the capacity of the poor to treat **themselves** with dignity. The creativity that was unleashed among the poor to create their own solutions and prevention strategies was phenomenal."

"Wisdom is proved right by her deeds." Christ's ideas work! Truly following in Christ's way and embracing the challenges to the dominant assumptions of the powerful - is a humbling lesson for the expert in us all.

If we set aside the dominant rhetoric of church experts, who are predicting doom for Christianity, we have the possibility of listening to ordinary members, who in our gatherings suggest ways forward. And even when it gets tough, thank God for the promise we are left with:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."