

Reflections from CRST
Monroe Congregational Church
July 12, 2015
Rev. Jennifer Gingras

Proverbs 1:1-7, 3:1-8

Perhaps you've heard once or twice in your life that you should respect and listen to your elders-have you heard that before? The older and older I get the more attractive that phrase seems to me! This morning's scripture is an invitation to consider the insight and wisdom of our elders, and it feels like its speaking to me.

In theory (at least) the older we get, the wiser we become. And yet, we often place the emphasis in our culture on the youth, don't we? Who even knows how much is spent every year on things like anti-wrinkle cream and hair dye? To be honest, I'm increasing my budget on one and cutting back on the other!

It fascinated me this week to spend time with our Lakota friends on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. Unlike our youth-oriented culture, the Lakota way is to treat their elders well, with respect and dignity. These elders they have survived tremendous hardships and lived through very difficult times: poverty, isolation, winters that can whip the wind to 30 degrees below zero, having their culture stripped away from them in mandatory boarding schools.

And just to sit with these folks and to have coffee and conversation... it's like sitting with a living, breathing piece of history. Mind you, not like the history we get out of our books, but the kind that you only know if you have lived it. You see, in Lakota tradition, the grandmothers and grandfathers they are the bedrock of the community. And they will be the first to tell you that their community is struggling.

Imagine a landscape both beautiful and harsh... a place where you can't dig in the ground without a pick ax, nor can you plant a tomato because the soil is like clay and it hardens to the consistency of cement and there is nothing but rolling hills and no trees to provide shade.

Imagine a place where alcoholism and drug abuse has a hold on many if not most adults of child-rearing and middle age, where a 97% unemployment rate keeps families in a state of hopelessness and dependence.

Imagine a place so sparsely populated that you know the name of all one hundred people in your community, but you are not speaking to half of them because of wrongs committed many generations ago. And you hold on to the anger.

Imagine a K-12 school with a graduation rate of 5% where five years ago children do not even know how to answer the question "*what would are you going to be when you grow up?*" because they can't imagine their own future.

If you sit down and listen to the elders you will hear that these wise ones want change. They want to be a strong community, they want peace and sobriety and health, they want to bring fractured families together, they want their grandchildren to be able to dream. They want to be healthy and whole and happy: mind, body and spirit. They want their grandchildren to learn the old Lakota ways, their language and tradition.

Their hope is to bring healing to the community, a sense of pride back to their people. And as you might imagine, achieving positive change in any community cannot be done by any single person and it cannot be done overnight. Building trust, after decades of dysfunction, takes time... for all involved.

It's been five years since a group from MCC has been going to the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation with Simply Smiles. *If you were on that first trip would you please raise your hand?* I wasn't on that first trip but I heard stories about the pervasive sense of hopelessness and how difficult it was to understand the brokenness in community.

I want you to know that a lot has happened in five years. Where once there was an overwhelming sense of mistrust and fear, there are some real friendships. There are opportunities to sit down with elders and speak honestly about the struggle. That's because the promises that have been made have been kept! Relationships have grown. Inch by inch progress has been made.

That school I talked about serves 200 students in grades K-12, from three surrounding towns. And this year, there's one deserving, hard-working high school graduate who has been offered a full scholarship to Fairfield University! It was the work of Simply Smiles that helped open the doors for that scholarship and gave this bright young woman hope for the future.

Where once there was a crumbling community center (and that was it), there is now a place where people gather to throw horseshoes. These strong tall men, throwing horseshoes, are some of the best in the country! They travel many miles to compete and in doing so, bring a sense of pride to the community.

The children of the reservation attend a weekly book club and go to summer camp, where volunteers ask them repeatedly "what are you going to be when you grow up?"... they have begun to answer! The youth who once had no hope and no options now play basketball on a court that members of our church help to construct. This year we installed a new archery range and they are practicing this ancient art form, some of them, for the very first time.

There is also a greenhouse that helps them grow lots of vegetables to share - all year round. It's fantastic! Women are relearning the art of quilting and making Star blankets which once was their practice. Families are gathering at community meals and movie nights. The community is getting stronger and soon there will a new playground... an additional place for that will give children a safe place just to be kids.

It used to be that if you sat down and have a conversation with one of the 8 year olds, you hear words coming out of their mouth that you think they are 28 years old. But they are starting to understand there's a better way of interacting, with respect and manners. Their behavior is better, because they needed space just to be kids.

Simple, consistent, thorough, acts of friendship and community building are making a difference in La Plant. For all of you who went on that first mission trip (and the ones that followed), know that what you have done has made a difference. For those of you who have supported the work by attending a Simply Smiles fundraiser,

even if all you did was buy a butter braid from our team this year, thank you! If you prayed for us, thank you so much for your support. From the bottom of our hearts, we couldn't do this work without you.

For those of you considering making this sacred journey next year, hold the date of July 23, 2016 in your calendar. Speak with me or Scott or Jan, or any of our team for more information. We want you there, and we want you to see to see for yourself. And if you do join us, get ready to have your heart broken wide open. Get ready to get on that big red bus, covered on the inside with positive affirmations for the children in LaPlant to read on their way to summer camp. Messages like *"Thank you La Plant, we've learned so much," "Bless you," "Keep up the good work," "Dream big," "You are worth it."*

When you are there, you may realize that community is a gift and elders are a blessing. It's true. And children they are not only our future but they are our very real present. And children can learn anything. And a smile can change anything... creating fertile soil and turning enemies into friends and despair into hope.

The night before we left for home I sat down with one of the elder women to say thanks and she asked me to pray for the youth of her community. I told her *"Barbara, we pray for you every week here in our church. We pray for LaPlant and our Cheyenne River Sioux friends every week."* She said to me *"Don't just pray for me, pray for the children."* I promised her that we will. We'll keep going back and supporting this wonderful organization that is changing lives, one smile at a time, one child at a time, one elder at a time. Thank you for being the community you are and for helping us do so much over the years. Amen.