



## **The Mark of a Great Nation**

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Hello members of Parliament, distinguished guests. It's good to be with you. You honor me by allowing me to come and share with you. You honor me by taking the time to be here. I can't even imagine how busy you are. I've just been eavesdropping on conversations and God bless you, you're busy people. Do know that I esteem greatly your willingness to take this time.

Thank you to Darlene and her group for hosting and making this group happen. Thank you for the hospitality that you've kindly shown to me.

I probably also need to bring greetings from my boss. I'm just in the process of getting used to not being the boss and so sometimes I forget. My boss is a wonderful woman named (Andrea Draskovic). She is the President and CEO of Yonge Street Mission and she would not be happy if I were to address you and not bring her greetings. I'm glad to bring her greetings to you.

I've been asked to talk a little bit about my faith journey, my time with the poor, what that has to say about leadership and what great leaders might look like. I'm going to give myself a touchstone for that from the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who was talking about King Josiah, Israel's youngest king, often considered to be one of its best kings. A short verse that says,

“Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He pled the cause of the cause of the afflicted and the needy, then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord?” (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

Now for me this is the Word of God. For some of you it's a good read. For some of you it's a good word. Take it at face value.

I'm a Canadian of Lebanese descent. I grew up in Saint John. My Lebanese family began to migrate to Canada in 1896. I have Irish family as well, who came a little earlier. The mixture of Lebanese and Irish is a fairly common thing in Atlantic Canada. The British didn't like either of us a lot, so they tended to put us in each other's faces, hoping we would annoy each other and in fact we married each other.

Now my Lebanese grandfather [...] came with a wife and determined to marry within his people. When his wife died, he went back to Lebanon, as a man of about 21 years old and he was promised in marriage to Amelia Stevens, my grandmother. She was one year old at the time. When she was twelve years old, she was taken to Beirut, put on a boat and sent to North

America to meet this man. In fact they married when she was thirteen, just three years before we changed the law in Canada to make that illegal. Today we would just put him in jail.

However, the nice part of the story for me is that my grandfather could not get papers to get my grandmother into the country. He got her as far as Maine and then there's a little discrepancy as to whether he, or one of my uncles went to Maine. But (they) bought a horse and wagon. They were all (skilled) carpenters. They built a false bottom in the wagon and they smuggled my grandmother into Canada in the bottom of the wagon. Now that's simply to say, I come from good illegal stock. Give us time, we become Baptist ministers.

I've spent about 40 years of my life working with low income people. That makes me probably one of the most fortunate people I know. I am one of those who get up everyday and do to a job that I like, with people I like and get to see the impact of that. Even when the impact goes south or sideways. I get to see it, experience it and deal with people. So I am very, very fortunate.

However, when I started 40 years ago, probably like most people, I was filled with caricatures. I thought that poverty was a fairly simple thing and was all about money. If you had money, you weren't poor. If you didn't have money, you were poor. When in fact money has very little to do with poverty. Lack of money is almost a byproduct of poverty. I came, as I mentioned, from this immigrant family. We're in this quagmire because we are both the people who freeload off welfare and take all your jobs and we manage to do that at the same time, which ought to cause you to want to work with us.

At eleven I went to work for my dad in his store. He told me early on, you're Lebanese in an English country, you will have to work twice as hard as everybody else to get ahead. I suspect every immigrant child is told that by their parents, but it meant that by the time I started getting interested in being involved with the poor, I had a bag full of caricature images. They were lazy. They made bad choices. They were just working the system. If only they would pull themselves up by their own straps. The problem with caricature images is there is just enough evidence out there to support them, especially if you don't take a second look.

For me that second look began roughly 40 years ago in the south end of Saint John. I had worked in a low income community before, but I don't know that it impacted me the same way as being in Saint John. First off, it's my home. I remember I had been hired by two churches to build bridges between the neighborhood and the churches. And I'm looking for a toe hold and someone said, "Go and see so and so."

I went to their home and I rang the doorbell. The door swung open and I looked straight up two flight of stairs, no landing. And there's a woman with a string in her hand that she had used to open the door. As soon as the door opened, she started screaming at me - not yelling, but screaming. And for the next two hours, she screamed at me. I remember thinking, "I hope I never have to go back there again."

Sure enough, I did. And after several sessions with her, she said to me, "I would like you to meet a bunch of my friends. And you work for the church, so I want you to come do a Bible study."

I asked, "What on?"

And she said, "Tell us how to be Christian."

Well I could probably do that. I get to the Bible study and it's one of those old Atlantic Canadian homes that have these massive kitchens. And there are seventeen women in this kitchen. I walk in and I overhear one woman say to another, "Your eye is black."

And the woman says, "Yes, so and so hit me."

The woman who asked the question says, "My guy hasn't hit me in a couple of months."

Before we ever got to start the study, it became clear to me that fifteen of seventeen women in that room were abuse survivors, or not-survivors currently living with abuse. I remember sitting there going, "What are you going to do with this?"

Obviously whatever I had prepared wasn't going to be the right thing for the day. In truth, I went back to my denomination and I said, "What do you do?"

And they essentially said, "We don't know."

I went to Family Services and I said, "I have inherited this group of women. What do I do?"

They said, "Nothing. You're a man. Men have hurt them. Go away, leave them alone. They don't need another man messing about in their life."

I went back to the group of women and I said, "Family Services said I should bail."

They said, "I'm sorry, men got us into this mess. Men should get out of this mess."

Thus began a journey where my caricature images began to fall apart. From that group of women, to a group of child prostitutes, to throwaway youth on the streets of Toronto, to survivors of residential schools. To abandoned seniors in our inner cities, who are just as alone as the kids who live on our streets. To the severely disabled homeless, who we allow to wander the streets of our city, almost like adult children without care. Those encounters moved me to, what I hope is, a more compassionate position and to more compassionate involvements.

As I went looking for help to understand what I was encountering—I don't want to be harsh, but keep in mind this was almost 40 years ago—I went to my denomination looking for help and there was very little. It was foreign ground to them.

### **Scriptures: Oppression and Poverty**

Being a person of faith, I figured at the very least, I need to find out what our Book says. I didn't know there were 2,000 Scriptures that talked about poverty and the poor. I didn't know that the weight of that scriptural evidence strongly favored the poor. If there were 2,000 Scriptures that talked about the poor, there were about 20 that talked about poverty being the responsibility of the poor, whereas the vast majority talked about wider social issues that contributed to the creation of poverty.

It was the opposite of what I had been hearing: that somehow poverty was the fault of the poor and there was a balance position that was social responsibility. Then there was this biblical

word that said there's massive social responsibility, balanced with personal responsibility. What surprised me was that my church was on the side of the wider society, as opposed to its own Scriptures.

I didn't know that the term "oppression" or "the oppressed" was actually the number one word in Scripture to describe the poor. When I started seeing the people who were coming to Yonge Street Mission, what I began to realize, was that we kept encountering people who were the survivors of violence. Either family violence, domestic violence, or societal violence, but they had been victims of oppression.

I didn't know there was a wealth of literature that talked about the poor who were disabled and infirm.

I didn't know that famine could mean more than simply a lack of food. It could mean, in an urban context, a lack of jobs, which in turn led to a lack of food.

I didn't know that the Scriptures had words about our responsibility to care for the dependent poor, the welfare recipient, the poor that we don't like to like, and yet this strong word about how we care for them. And worry about those who are dispossessed, maybe in Canada First Nations peoples. To be dispossessed means you lose your stake hold. You lose your position. You lose your voice, ultimately, within the society. I didn't know that.

I didn't know that there were words of how we were to care for orphans and widows and aliens. The recent Syrian refugee crisis has made me think a lot of [...] my Lebanese grandmother and what it must have been like for her at twelve years old to arrive in Canada alone, going to meet some old guy and marry him. I can't even imagine what was going on in her head.

I discovered there are 200 references in Scripture that talk about immigrants, foreigners, aliens, refugees. And they speak very strongly about our responsibility to be there. We don't get to say "not our people"; it's almost as if they are all our people.

I didn't know that the multitudes that followed Jesus were predominantly poor. I didn't know that Paul taught his followers that they were to work so they would have to give away to the others - maybe the highest theology at work in Scriptures. I didn't know that James spoke very harsh words to early Christians for their failure to engage people in poverty.

I discovered there was this very rich body of material that was strong enough to actually guide me in my work and I was out at the same time buying every current book I could find. But in truth, I found almost this hidden treasure of resources that would help me in my work. That compassion led me - I've spent most of my life either building openings,) working in drop-ins, healthcare services for street people, developing computer literacy programs for inner-city kids on the wrong side of the technical divides. Things that are what you do when you're moved to compassion. You want to do something that makes a difference, that improves the lot of people's lives.

You also invest your life in changing what you do. When I first came to Yonge Street Mission, the poor would come to our food bank and there would be these long awful lineups. It was embarrassing. I would come into my office and I would have to break through the line every

morning. I could remember being embarrassed. And of course people would say, "How do you know they're not stealing your food?"

They're waiting in line for two hours for \$10 worth of groceries. It doesn't make good economic sense, unless you need it. So we began to ask, "How do you deliver food to the poor in more dignified ways?"

I remember I was having fights with staff over things like, what would happen if we let people pick their own food. What if, come Christmas, people got to pick their own toys, instead of people showing up at a window and being told, "Well here is your 12-year-old-kid bag of toys."

And somebody says, "Well my daughter doesn't like dolls. She likes to play hockey."

And you go, "Well this is the 12-year-old-girl bag of toys."

I remember staff saying, "I don't think we can let people see all the toys we have. Maybe we'll have fights."

And we did have a few, but not many.

On the flip side of that, somebody has said in truth, that you can't work with the poor if you don't dance with the rich. It's just impossible to do that dance. Along the way, you learn how to engage church people and business leaders to call forth compassion from them, so that they invest and allow you to do more than you could ever do on your own. In fact, you can do nothing without them.

I remember very early on, a couple of business guys come me to saying, "Rick, you're hurting the mission."

And I said, "Why?"

They said, "Well you don't know any rich guy.s"

And I said, "Well I'm not supposed to be working with them. I'm supposed to be working with poor guys."

They said, "You can't pay your bills, right?"

And I said, "Well we're having a hard time."

They said, "Go get some rich guys and they'll help you pay your bills."

They were right. And what I discovered in Toronto - and I suspect it's true in Ottawa - is that the affluent in our city were very generous particularly if you could talk with them. [...]

I met with a business guy one day and I'm coming into the Toronto club. And he came to sit down and said to me, "If you're here to beat me up, the meeting is over."

And I said, "I don't know you. Why would I beat you up?"

He said, "All you left wing do-gooders want our money, but you don't like us. What's wrong with that picture?"

I said, "Well again, I don't know you yet, but give me a minute."

The truth is, when I got back from that meeting, I said to our staff, "You cannot work with the poor and hold a position that is hostile to the rich. You can call the rich to justice. You can call the rich to compassion. But you can't hold a hostile position, because you can't serve the poor from that position."

However, now it's not 40 years earlier, it's 40 years later and I'm not only [asking myself], "Where did my life go?" but also, "What did I do?"

### **Compassion versus Justice**

I've come to a place where I have come to believe this: compassion is not enough. Compassion is not bad. God help us if we are ever anything less than a compassionate country. But compassion is not enough. It won't get us where we need to be. Compassion is important for a civil society, but we need to move beyond compassion. We need to move to justice.

If I were starting over again today, I would invest all the time that I invested studying poverty in studying justice and asking questions about justice. I don't look back and [think] those 40 years were wrong, because I don't know that Canada could have heard some of the justice conversations 40 years ago, but I think we can hear them now.

Justice, as you can well imagine, for me is not about law and order. It is a value and like all values, it's aspirational. You're never going to attain it, so you're always working towards it.

Justice is about working to ensure that the goods and services of a nation are there for all the people of the nation. It's not about everybody getting the same. It's not a communism thing, where we put it all in the middle and everyone draws their percentage. It is about making sure that fairness rules. And that everybody within the society shares in the Gross National Product, in the wealth of the nation, but also in the wisdom of the nation.

Compassion feeds the poor. Justice asks, "Why do the poor need to be fed?"

Compassion is the ambulance service at the bottom of the cliff. Justice is the fence at the top of the cliff that keeps people from falling off.

Compassion lessens the impact of poverty. Justice works to eliminate poverty, again aspirationally. Perfection doesn't exist, it's always aspirational.

When I went back to my Scriptures and asked questions about justice, I discovered that the Scriptures talk a lot about justice around, what you might call, the quartet of the vulnerable. In fact, somebody has called them that. It talks about justice for widows. It talks about justice for orphans. It talks about justice for aliens, foreigners. And it talks about justice for the collectivity that is the poor. Because the poor are not ever one group of people. They are a very diverse group of people.

Then I discovered that the Scripture never actually defines justice. In the first five Books of Moses, it tells you all the things that justice looks like. Justice sells food to the poor with no profit. Justice makes sure that the poor get to hang out) corners of your field and reap the

second harvest. Justice makes sure that you don't take the widow's cloak from her when you have something that she needs. There are all these images and models portrayed in the first five books.

Then the prophets come along and they give the flip side. The first five books [of Moses] tell you what you (aspire) to do. The prophets come along and say you're not doing so them well. I was going to say they don't beat you up, but the truth of the matter is, sometimes they do. They are pretty firm about our failure to care for the widow, the orphan, the alien and the poor.

### **The Mark of a Great Nation**

That led me to this: I believe the mark of a great nation is seen in its capacity to care for its most vulnerable people. That's the mark of a great nation. The first 1 or 2% are always going to do fine. The first 20% are always going to do fine. Maybe the top 50% are always going to do fine, but there will always be a bottom 20% or 30%. In Toronto it's beginning to look like a bottom 50-60% who aren't doing so fine.

The mark of a great nation is you bring your people with you. They don't get left behind. It means that a great nation cares about things like children who've been products of abusive orphanages, or abusive detention centers and I come from the Maritime Canada, where both are common. It means we care about First Nations rights: treaty rights, land rights, the resolution of issues that rise from things like residential schools systems.

I actually fear for us as a nation over this one. The most vulnerable people in our society, those who struggle with mental illness, and we leave them on the streets of our city. Homeless, all in the name of personal freedom, it's a value gone amuck. A great nation would have a great housing policy.

A great nation would ensure that no one would ever have to work for less money than you can live on. Working for less money than you can live on is just another word for slavery. A great nation would ensure that all its people could earn enough to care for themselves.

A great nation would ensure the rights of marginalized people. A good nation would commit itself, as we have, to ending child poverty - though we haven't done it, but we have made the commitment.

A great nation would commit itself to mitigating the gap between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. We get those reports from the UN, that talk about Toronto or Canada. They say it's the best place in the world to live. And then they always end sounding rather biblical, saying, "This one thing we have against you. Your rich are getting richer and your poor are getting poorer." There is this enormous gap that is forming, that cannot be good for the well-being of the nation, or civil society.

By extension then, for me, the mark of a great leader is someone who takes their life and invests themselves in attaining those values. Who doesn't come into office for power, but comes into office to serve the people - all the people. A great leader is there to serve.

King Josiah, the man being talked about in the Scripture I read, became king when he was a child, but he was known for his capacity to party. The passage in Hebrew could actually be

interpreted, he ate too much and drank too much - a banqueting sort of guy. Or put it another way, he enjoyed his wealth,

But it says that he did justice. That word justice is about societal or institutional justice. He made sure that the laws were right and he made sure the laws were interpreted and applied right and fairly. It said he was personally just. That's what the word righteous means. It means he lived justly himself. He didn't cheat people in his business dealings. He didn't charge too much. He was fair and honorable.

Then it says he pled the cause. It's a legal term. He was an advocate. He pled the cause of the poor. And I believe it is the task of a great leader to plead the cause of the poor.

To wrap this up, I believe this: from coast to coast in Canada, from Canada to the corners of the world, we will always need compassionate caregivers - that's kind of my job. But we will also need great leaders who establish just laws and practices, so that the most vulnerable citizens in this society can participate fully and justly within the society. That's your job.

In fairness, it is all our jobs, whether we are political leaders, business leaders, church leaders. Whatever kind of leaders we are, it becomes all of our jobs to work that in the end we might have a truly civil and inclusive society.

To me, the mark of a great leader: we work for justice. Thank you. Bless you.