

Chronicles of Diversity

Your leadership weekly



Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe

Travels with Laidlaw

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A little after 8 AM on Monday July 7th, the yellow 78 passenger bus, followed closely by the heavily loaded Ford van and trailer, pulled slowly out of the parking lot in front of the youth room. The team comprised of four maturing men, several pastoral interns, and about 40 high school and college aged men and women began the four day journey from the Puget Sound to the woods of Minnesota. The focus of this trip would be to strengthen a church plant in Bemidji, Minnesota, the ancestral home of Paul Bunyan and his blue Ox Babe

A little before 4 PM on Thursday July 24th, that same bus filled with the same people, less one who got sick, returned to that same parking lot, all greatly changed for having been enriched by the experience. Over the next few weeks I will recount some of the things that happened.

The most significant from my perspective was the spiritual plight of our native population. I grew up in close proximity to both the Spokane and Colville Reservations, but until this trip I had little idea of the extent of the Reservation system that encompasses vast areas of the states in which we traveled.

We spent two afternoons in the town of Deer River. This racially mixed off reservation community, by its size both of the town and the high school, brought back striking memories of my high school days in Kettle Falls. But as we learned more about the community, we found out that this was one of the most violent schools in the state. While US 2 passes through the town, it is not a simple exit for most of the community, and the opportunities within are quite limited.

Perhaps the best way to give you an idea of this deep seated posture, I would like to share with you two views of Paul Bunyan, one from the plaque by the statue of Paul Bunyan in downtown Bemidji. The other just across the street in a window of a nonprofit agency.

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Plaque in front of statues

The statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe were both built in 1937 in connection with a January Winter Carnival. The 16 foot Paul weights two and one half tons and stands above five tons of concrete footings. Babe was originally built to be mobile covered with canvas, and for two years was trucked in parades throughout Minnesota before returning in 1939 to be cemented down beside his friend, Paul. The two figures remain permanent symbols of Bemidji and its most colorful era of logging and lumber jacks. American Legion Ralph Cragie Post # 14 Bemidji, MN.

Na-na-bu-shu's Fight with Paul Bunyan

This is a story that is told in the lodges of the Ojibways in the Chippewa National Forest, a forest that Na-na-bu-shu saved from the axes and wasteful loggers, typified by the notorious Paul Bunyan:

Paul Bunyan, who had logged off the eastern states and had finished with Mich., and Wis., and part of Minn., was cruising in the forests near Cass Lake, Looking for white pine. It was in the area near Schley that the wise Na-na-bu-shu met up with the great Paul, who was the toughest fighter of his time.

Na-na-bu-shu told Paul to get going. The great Bunyan aimed a haymaker at the Indian, thinking he would end the battle quick. Paul got the surprise of his life. The Indian was not there. Then Paul got slapped in the mouth with an Ojibway blackjack (a smoked whitefish) and a yank on his black whiskers that knocked him off his feet.

For forty days and forty nights, they fought up and down the forest. The ground was torn up by the two champions.

Paul swung blow after blow at the Indian, who dodged every blow, and yanked Paul's whiskers before the big fellow could recover his balance.

At last, Paul brought one up from the ground, putting his all into the blow. He missed the Chippewa, and crashing into a giant white pine, he knocked himself out.

Na-na-bu-shu yanked out Paul's whiskers, to make a warbonnet. Then he made the great Paul promise that he would (sic) never set foot in the Chippewa forest, except on "a sustained yield" basis, and to look west for his clear cutting. To bind the bargain a statue of Paul was erected on the shore of Lake Bemidji showing Paul, without his whiskers, and looking wistfully westward.

From the conversations I had during the trip, I am convinced that the mission field of Native Americans both in the United States and probably Canada, presents one of the most difficult opportunities in North America and perhaps the world.

Most of the native populations of this continent were Christianized by the blackcoats (Jesuit priests) accompanying the exploration and settling of the west. In conjunction with this religious conversion, their lands were taken, they fought numerous losing wars, were exploited with drugs and alcohol, were herded like animals on to reservations deemed worthless to white colonizers, and watched helplessly as their sacred lands were exploited to a god of greed and materialism. As this has continued to this day, is it at all plausible that they could get the God of the Bible confused with the religious god that has caused their plight?

To put it another way, it would not be too difficult to add to the above list so that it includes numerous infractions of each of the biblical Ten Commandments. So if you are going to speak about grace you must in some way begin not with catholic penance, but with a tangible, and I did say tangible demonstration of God's grace through love.

One serious question must be ask, Could the Great Spirit of their pagan religion have more in common with Jahweh, than the Christian god that has lead to their bondage?

A dead Jesus hanging on a cross doesn't do much for me. I doubt I could make the connection with the risen Christ that offers freedom from bondage, unless I began there, in that freedom, and then learned post redemption of this religious formalism. So today the great red hope is to develop a good casino and exploit weak whites of their rent and riches, in hopes of raising enough capital to bring about some economic and community development to reservation lands.

This gambling opportunity enhances the level of hopelessness, for the problem while it is somewhat about poverty, finds its roots in the vacuum of spiritual truth. On our last night in Bemidiji our coffee house was frequented by three very well seasoned cynical natives. Through the booze they were still able to play their well rehearsed rolls to achieve their predetermined goals. This is a problem that cannot be solved by just asking Jesus into your heart. It requires a program of disciplined love. Something the evangelical church is as weak as the preceding Roman Catholics.

But how do you teach human dignity that is centered in the God who created mankind as His highest creation? The problem is fundamentally spiritual and not economic, but it requires a level of discipleship that is not found in present books and salvation outlines, for it cannot be a one call close. To reach this group of people, borrowing from a popular cable cooking show, we will have to take current Christian leadership and ‘Kick it up a notch.’ Perhaps, more than one or two.

I will have more to say about this in the weeks to come.

Seeds for Prayer

While we were in Minnesota our cook who we knew as “Wild Bill” provided us with food and hospitality. Bill was from Seattle and good friends of the Freshours, the associate pastor in Bemidiji. On the way home while resting in a Montana rest area, Wild Bill was killed when his car was engulfed in flames when hit at high speed. This incident points not only to what we do as our ministry, but also the sovereignty of God, and how we are to make each day count. For we truly do not know how long we have in our pilgrimage.

As for me I finally have the operation scheduled to fix my little finger on the 20th of August. During our basketball clinic at Bemidiji I was amazed with the ability to play basketball with those much my junior. This, less than five months after my aortic surgery. I definitely did not have the conditioning to compete at the level I have liked to participate, but none the less I consider this gift at this time to be miraculous.

The immediate path ahead is to get the Reardan place fixed up and to get rid of the rest of the estate personal effects and some of my stuff that is no longer needed. This will be a task that I do not know really how long it will take, but again I am thankful that I am able to do it at this time and not have to wait until next year as many people advised me as my only alternative.

The big question lies beyond that point. This semi retired life is full of adventures, but I still need to develop a means to earn some money that is consistent with what I feel are God’s goals for my life.