

Patch Adams in Swift Current

John 20:19–23

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It's approaching 25 years since the movie, *Patch Adams*, was released. I have seen it a few times over the years, though not recently. I assume many of you may have seen it; some of you probably not. There is much about the movie that I found interesting, aside from the fact that the late Robin Williams had the ability to make most any movie interesting. The movie is based on the life of Hunter 'Patch' Adams who struggled with life, including his mental health. He becomes well enough to enter med school. As a doctor he founds the Gesundheit Institute, "gesundheit" being the German word for "health." It is the Gesundheit Institute that captured my imagination. The philosophy underlying the Institute was that the best candidates to help people heal were other people who needed healing. I recall it the philosophy that underlies Alcoholics Anonymous and I said to myself, as I watched the movie: "Yes! For sure."

I realized there are some limits to this idea. That is, sometimes we also need the trained professionals. When I had colon cancer in 2015 I would not have wanted Wally Pearson to be wielding the knife and no matter how good he is at frying and serving sausages at Coop, I would not have wanted Ron Dyck to mix the chemo cocktail. Still, within a week of being diagnosed with cancer, I started a Facebook group that would be there to travel with me over the next 9 months to a year. They became integral to my healing journey. One person in particular, someone who had a similar cancer & chemo journey was important as a traveling partner. Thanks, Lori.

I have no idea if Patch Adams ever read the Jesus story we just heard or if perchance, between his death on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday Jesus time-traveled to 1999 and watched the movie. However, as I read that Jesus story again in preparation for today, I realized that Patch Adams and Jesus shared the same healing philosophy: The best people to help us heal are those who, like us, need healing.

To understand this about the Jesus story, we need to travel back to a story from the collection of stories that the Ancient Storytellers called *In the Beginning*. The story is the one where Eve and Adam stand around a tree, engage in conversation with a snake, pick some apples, and make apple pie and apple beer. Okay, I imagined some of that but the basics are in the story: they picked fruit from a tree and ate it. The result was that they and their descendants were infected with a disease more infectious than Covid and allegedly more deadly than Ebola, a disease that has infected the human race since and even today, infects every one of the 8 billion people on our planet. What was this disease and why did the eating of that apple cause it?

That's a question scholars and preachers have mused on, discussed, and debated for centuries, with what would seem to be too little agreement. I am here today to give you the definitive answer. Okay, that would be arrogance without bounds. I am, however, going to suggest what I think it was and how that fits with the Easter evening Jesus story and the movie. *Patch Adams*.

The traditional interpretation, certainly shaping Christian thought in the 16th century Reformation and having roots possibly as early as the 4th century and very much part of Catholic and Evangelical theology today is a forensic one. That is God made a law—don't eat; Adam and Eve broke the law by eating—they sinned. This made them guilty and deserving of punishment,

a guilt passed on to all their descendants including you and me. Sin and guilt must always be punished. The initial punishment is inevitable physical death. The second, more severe and more to be feared punishment, is hell. The only way that humans could be saved was by someone without guilt taking the punishment in our place. Common understanding but, I suggest, way off base.

The tree was known as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Snake's offer was that eating the fruit would make Eve and her husband wise and turn them into beings like God. Who wouldn't want that? They would become God—independent and in charge., Who doesn't want that today?! And so they ate and so we still eat today and we think ourselves 'God,' wise enough to determine what is good and what is evil and therefore in a position to judge everyone else. The result: broken relationships. In the story, broken relationship between intimate partners and between humans and God. As the story continues, broken relationships between brothers as Cain kills Abel. And then, in the tragic words of Lamech, unfettered revenge, death and destruction. He boldly declares that whereas if anyone hurt Cain, Cain would be avenged 7x, Lamech will be avenged 77x. Brokenness and death without limits. And so it has been throughout history.

The virus that found life in that "In the Beginning" moment continues to wreak havoc on the human race and relationships within it. Between intimate partners and family members, between neighbours and in the community. We think ourselves god, believe we have the ability and right to declare who is right and who is wrong—and of course we are always right and the other is always wrong—and relationships are broken, families torn apart, and communities cast into turmoil. This attitude of judgement, of declaring ourselves better than the others, of me being right and you being wrong has infected the relationship between races creating white supremacy most definitely but all too often between any two races. It has infected Christianity. Can you think of any place where we make more declarations of right and wrong, think ourselves God and our words the Word of God, and destroy relationships through judgement than in the church? A few years back Sylvia and I turned into Moose Jaw on 9th Street and came to an intersection that had a church on each of three of its four corners. Somewhat cynically I admit, I said to Sylvia we could call this Judgement Junction.

Judgment and declaring good and evil, right and wrong, me and the other is increasingly poisoning our politics. It is probably most obvious in the US but the virus has slithered north and whereas we used to have Conservatives and Liberals who, though offering different visions of Canada showed respect for each other, we now have a Conservative leader who spews negativity and division at every opportunity. We need only wait for the election campaign for the Liberals to pick up the same destructive style.

Every war that has ever been fought, every act of terrorism and one country invading another, the CIA overthrowing democratic governments, passenger jets flying into buildings, all of this, is rooted in that fateful disease—I am the judge and you are wrong and therefore I can kill you and avenge my own hurt 77x.

Though the Ancient Prophets and Folk Singers spoke much of covenant and described humanity's rejection of God as adultery, they were firmly rooted in and convinced by the idea that wrong doing would be punished, painting horrific pictures of what it would be like when Yahweh arrived on the scene. Yahweh tried to inspire them with an alternative vision. Every now and then one of the Song Writers heard and penned a beautiful poem about God's love and

the end to judgment and punishment. But then, the harp would be overwhelmed by another trumpet blast of judgment and punishment.

Yahweh, the God we worship, the One revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, finally realized there was only one hope of changing the vision and imagination of Prophets, Folk Singers, Religious Guardians and People alike. Yahweh would have to visit and show the people who God really was and is. And so God visited Planet Earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus preached that Alternative Vision—Love instead of division, Forgiveness instead of revenge—and faced the inevitable consequence of such teaching. Jesus was crucified. But much more than a Teacher being crucified it was God in Jesus being crucified and God saying in the act of allowing that to happen: “Do whatever you will to me, I will always respond with love and forgiveness. You can do nothing to void my love. You can do nothing to make me take revenge. You can do nothing that I will not forgive.”

And then came Easter Sunday evening. Returning from the dead, having demonstrated to any and all who God really is, Jesus arrived in the room where his disciples were hiding and said: The job is not done. In fact, it has barely begun. As Yahweh, my Father (had he spoken today he would have added Mother), as Yahweh my Loving Parents sent me, so I am now sending you. Every human being needs healing and they will only experience healing if they experience forgiveness. Go now and forgive. Go now and spread reconciliation till the entire human race is cured of judgment and vengeance and is infused with forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Though the story does not tell us, I can imagine the disciples’ response: “Jesus, are you out of your mind?!?! You know, you experienced it, how deeply ingrained the judgment and vengeance virus is. And you expect us to bring healing for that, with nothing but love and forgiveness?!?! With all due respect, Jesus, that sounds crazy!!”

Without so much as batting an eye, Jesus breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” One act. Four words. It is easy to miss their significance. Two things we should note for they are vitally important in what this story tells us and commissions us with—extending forgiveness to any and all. One, when Jesus “breathed on them,” he wasn’t simply sighing as if in frustrations that again these guys were not getting it. The word used by the Storyteller is the same word the LXX—the Greek translation of the OT—uses to describe what God did to the clay doll God has just shaped from clay in the river bed. God breathed into the man the breath of life. That is the intention here. Not just an exhausting of breath but a breathing into, an inflating with, a giving of life and energy of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for ‘spirit’ here is *pneuma*, another word for life-giving breath. Notice it is the root word for *pneumonia*. This Holy Breath is like the life-giving breath that animates our bodies, keeps us alive and going and energized.

Paul of Tarsus, in writing to Jesus People in Rome, tells them that this Holy Breath they have access to is the same life-giving Breath and Power that turned a man dead on Friday into a man alive, never to die again, on Sunday. Till that weekend, death had been the most powerful force in the Universe. Now, with the resurrection in the morning and the Holy Breath being breathed into the disciples in the evening, there was a Power unleashed even Death could not stop.

This is the power we have access to in our mission of forgiveness. This is the energy we have access to in our often difficult but wonderful work of bringing reconciliation, the reconciliation that will overcome the virus unleashed “In the Beginning.”

On Easter Sunday evening, through the disciples, Jesus commissioned us with the ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of healing. Like in Patch Adam's hospital and in AA groups, from that moment on it was going to be and still is people who are in need of forgiveness and who experience forgiveness who are to and will bring forgiveness into our world and transform our world from a world sick with judgment and vengeance into a world wonderfully alive with love and forgiveness.

Much to the chagrin of church bureaucrats, this requires no committees. Much to the disappointment of college and university deans, this requires no special education. Much to the disappointment of accountants, this does not need a budget. All it takes to bring healing to our world is men and women like us who are willing to say I will be a blessing and healing reminder of God's love in every situation and to each person I meet. I will always forgive, by the power of the Holy Breath within me, and will help others forgive. Until? Until the world is alive in all the colours of the rainbow with the love and forgiveness of God.