

Don't let my heart harden

Paul Lee

In 2007, like many people in British Columbia, I watched TV news reports of Robert Dziekanski, a Polish immigrant to Canada. He was killed on Oct 14, 2007, during an arrest at the Vancouver International Airport. He was tasered five times by the RCMP officers while he was detained alone in a secured room at the custom area of the airport, without an interpreter to help.

The long waiting, the lack of interpreters for a foreign language and the RCMP officers' abuse of power seemed to be the causes for the tragedy which should have been avoided from happening. The incident also brought forth a critical question to our Canadian communities – Are Canadians compassionate and accommodating to people of different cultures?

"No! We aren't," I pondered and said to myself while I was reading the news and reviews of Robert Dziekanski's incident. In 1997, our family had bought a house at the West side of Richmond. The wave of new immigrants from Hong Kong pouring into the city transformed the neighborhood drastically and many Caucasians left the area silently. While the number of Hong Kong and many other Asian immigrants was increasing, the number of

complaints rose accordingly. The complaints, as I still remembered, were about the demolishing of the elegant houses with beautiful front yards for the construction of huge and ugly 'monster houses', the chopping down of trees and the 'uncivilized driving manners', etc. As a person with English as the second language, I was easily annoyed in electrical appliance shops when the salesperson of different nationality didn't understand when I asked for lithium batteries or extension cords. I was also frustrated when the receivers of my phone calls could not understand my English with strong Chinese accents.



The second wave of immigrants from Mainland China sparked even a fiercer fire in the communities. Their culture and way of doing things both enrich the color of multiculturalism on one side and disturb the Canadian value and tradition on the other side. I read two stories from a local newspaper as follow: a Caucasian woman complained to various officials when her neighbors behaved in ways she didn't agree with. One woman from Mainland China kept a rooster in her backyard that woke her up at 5:00 every morning. When the white woman complained about this to the City Council, the Chinese

woman responded to the complaints by cutting off the bird's head. I might think that the complainant had felt guilty about being the cause for the rooster's death, or rationalized it as being necessary to restore peace and quietness to the neighborhood. Another story was about a Mexican family complained their Vietnamese neighbor's dog barking incessantly from dawn to dusk, the dog's owner simply cut the tongue of the dog to make it mute. At the meantime, the Vietnamese family stopped speaking to their Mexican neighbors as a kind of revenge. The neighborhood's quietness was restored, but the sound of silence started to reign over people whose hearts had turned hard.

My heart has also turned hard until few months ago when Rev. Richard Au announced to the parishioners that our Church, under the Refugee Families Sponsorship Program, was going to sponsor four refugee families from Syria and Iraq. Initially, I was not enthusiastic to the sponsorship program as I often stereotyped people from the middle-east countries as an ethnic group mysterious and alien to my Chinese culture and way of living. However, when I was encouraged to join the Supporting Group of the Sponsorship Program as a volunteer, the close contact with the first sponsored family from Syria changed my perception towards people from different ethnic groups. In a matter of recent two months, my wife and I have been working with other devoted and enthusiastic brothers and sisters in the parish to render support to the family in various areas such as household

settlement, children's schooling, ESL support, career pursuit, spiritual life, health care and other daily life issues. What I experienced in helping the family deep-rooting in a new home humbled me and made me open up and connect more fully with other ethnic groups and the world around me. I discovered how extraordinary they were. They were nothing like my biases had made them out to be. I learned that the Syrian family had fled their country to Jordan because of the ISIS' siege of Aleppo, the northern Industrial city of Syria. Their home was bombed twice and the father of the family was injured. They left their hometown and stayed at Jordan for more than a year, waiting with great uncertainty for a stable and peaceful life.

Now the Syrian family is my friends. I am able to taste their food prepared in their traditional Syrian style. Today, I would answer the critical question aforesaid differently and I'd say that it is possible for us to get along if people from different cultures have a sense of empathy and mercifulness. From our Christian perspective, now I can see how their lives and mine include experiences universal to us all: loss, disappointment, hope and love. I pray and thank God for not letting my heart harden in a country of myriad ethnic groups.

'Jesus answered, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" He looked at the people sitting around him and said, "Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother."'

Mark 3: 33-35

