



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Unexpected Freedom” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

August 25, 2019; Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 13:10-17; Excerpt from *Saint Francis of Assisi* by G.K. Chesterton

At first hearing, it sounds like a miracle story: Jesus heals a woman bound by an infirmity that kept her doubled over for nearly two decades, telling her she is set free and as he places his hands on her she can stand upright again. Our assumption is understandable. It looks like a great deed of power and who doesn't want that? We'd want it if we primarily saw people from the waist down all the time. But there's a dilemma with the wish. What if she wasn't healed? That doesn't happen in the gospels, but it highlights a problem with seeing miracles as the main point of Jesus' mission. It turns G-d into a genie granting wishes and an immoral one at that given the ongoing reality of suffering in the world. This is a way of seeing G-d that many atheists rightly reject.

Instead, the purpose of miracles in the gospels is to underline the power of Jesus' teaching and highlight how through him G-d's reign is being revealed. As such, what's essential to the story is what Jesus says to the woman: “you are set free”. She'd been held bound and through a word spoken by Jesus is liberated. She is freed not just from physical pain but spiritual pain as well, her isolation from not being able to see people face to face ended and her relationships restored. This liberation extends beyond the woman. Others in the story also have a chance for freedom. Jesus says she was bound by Satan. This congregation is well-versed in seeing Satan not as an entity but as a personification of all that holds us from living into G-d's realm, that holds us from loving fully and sharing with each other in a spirit of compassion and caring. Satan is a trickster, convincing us the path G-d offers is a dead end, and in the story there is some trickery going on.

How does this trickery work? Through fear. At first hearing, the main emotion looks like anger, especially for the synagogue leader upset people have come to be healed on the Sabbath. Beneath the anger is fear. He's afraid of violating the commandments, not just personally but by being present when one is broken. He is afraid then of G-d, who again seems more like an intervening deity deciding who to help and who to make suffer, than the source of loving compassion that undergirds Jesus' ministry. And beneath these fears I sense a fear of the one who was healed.

In this I suspect that he fears her as a woman. Consider Jesus' fair statement that the synagogue leader and others would untie an ox or donkey on the Sabbath in order to free it from thirst but are unwilling to do the same for the woman. Jesus reminds them she is a “daughter of Abraham” and so as worthy of caring as any “son” but clearly that doesn't matter. In the synagogue leader's mind, she is less worthy of aid than a farm animal. Sounds like misogyny, a fear of women. One theory suggests this fear is rooted in a boy's need to break from dependence on his mom, which culturally turns into a need for men to control women. Equality threatens that. It's an intriguing theory and the reality of sexism cross-culturally suggests there's some truth to it. But cultures with a greater sense of equality remind us there are other ways to define what being male means.

I suspect another fear is the woman's disability. In the bible, people associated infirmity with sin. We hear this in John's gospel when the disciples ask who sinned, the blind person or his parents, for him to have been born without sight. I wonder sometimes if we still struggle with that fear. While we know that abilities have nothing to do with being blessed or not, as a society we still fail to honour the lived experiences of people with disabilities. We see it in delays in making sure street corners and public buildings are barrier free. We hear it when someone raises their voice speaking with someone who's blind or asks the spouse of someone with a hearing impairment if they'd like coffee. We feel it in our discomfort at vocalizations and other tics of someone with Tourette's or in judgement when a child with learning challenges acts out. There is much to suggest that once all other "isms" are gone we'll still have ableism. Perhaps a biblical connection between ability and blessing is too deeply ingrained in our consciousness after all.

So, what are we to do? We can take our cue from Jesus' response to the woman. He showed compassion in her need. Compassion helps free us from our fear of the "other" as it places us in their shoes, if only for a moment. This is what we hear in G.K. Chesterton's account of Francis of Assisi who met a leper while travelling. He feared the disease so kept his distance as most people did. But as we heard in the story, he jumped off his horse and embraced the man. From that moment on he made caring for those with leprosy a part of his ministry. It was compassion that propelled him to dismount and the same thing will help us as a society, and as a congregation, to become inclusive of people regardless of ability or need. Compassion helps us to consider how to accommodate needs so everyone can participate. This goes beyond widening doors and installing an elevator for people with mobility concerns, although it is this for sure. It may mean having a braille bible available so someone who is blind can read the scriptures during worship, or incorporating ASL into the service for a Deaf person, providing a quiet space for someone who can get overwhelmed by too much stimuli or factoring in the needs of people with cognitive challenges. To do this we may need to seek advice as we did recently when considering how to be a more welcoming space for those on the autism spectrum. Everyone's needs though are different and so we need to let go of our fear of offending someone and ask. Better that than to make assumptions and end up hurting someone.

In *Dune*, which I spoke about during the "Learning Together" time, Frank Herbert writes: "Fear is the mind killer". He's right. It paralyzes us, even from doing what's right. But we don't need to stay afraid. Like Francis we can overcome fear. Like Jesus we can respond with compassion, and through it experience an unexpected freedom not just for ourselves but for an ever-widening circle. May we continue to grow in our compassion and so continue to walk away from our fear. Amen.