



Richmond Hill Reflections

"Finding a New Road" (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

September 1, 2019; Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 14:1-14; Excerpt from *The Long Count* by Andrea Klosterman Harris

Have you ever been going somewhere and decided on another way? Last year I took Finley for a walk, planning to go to Bond Lake. I turned left instead of right and ended up in Jefferson Forest. It's now my go-to walking spot. Some choices impact more than just where to walk. When I was in seminary, my social justice prof organized a trip to Nicaragua. My parents were not pleased I wanted to go. So I ended up going north instead and my life took a very different turn. I became a priest for that diocese rather than stay in Southern Ontario. If I'd gone on the trip who knows how my life would have turned? I may still be Catholic. I doubt I'd be as strongly interfaith or environmentally focused. I likely wouldn't have the same commitment to right relations with Indigenous people. It's amazing how a simple choice can open up an entirely new point of view.

It's such a choice Jesus was offering in our passage from Luke. At first, he seemed to be giving some sage advice about table etiquette. It's good advice. No one wants to be publicly shown to a less important seat. His advice was very apt in his context. Society was quite stratified. And patronage based. Consequently, reputation was everything. You got ahead by having a patron, someone just above you on the social ladder. You in turn helped those just below you. It's why everyone was vying for top spot. They weren't just determining their standing but ensuring they were seated by people who could shift it too. It's in this context that Jesus suggested their focus on reputation was a dead end. In the "I invite you and you invite me" pattern you didn't really get that much ahead. Everyone focused on who was helping whom just reinforced the system and maintained who was in the top chair. He was saying that if we really wanted to shift the narrative of how the world worked, we needed to ditch the patronage system and give a leg up to those who were overlooked and cast aside. If we really wanted to live into the realm of G-d, we needed to shift how we saw reward and make our actions about others rather than about ourselves. Jesus was offering a new viewpoint that could change the world.

The last two thousand years show that it didn't. After all you only consider a new approach if it isn't working. If you are in the economic and political driver's seat why change? We see this at play in Brazil. Despite international outcry, President Jair Bolsonaro has said the Amazon needs to be developed into land for the beef industry. He says the Amazon's future is for Brazilians to decide, or more to the point for him to decide. As heart-breaking as this is, I get what he's saying. He leads a country with a high rate of poverty. People need jobs. He can only imagine one source for jobs given how capitalism drives the global economy. Climate change isn't on his radar. Nor is biodiversity. Brazilian sovereignty is. Recently I was listening to a podcast Ian recommended to me, "Media Indigena", and a commentator said something that made me take notice. "People can imagine the possibility of the world ending from climate change but can't imagine anything but free market

capitalism which us bringing about climate change. It is sad but true, and speaks to how difficult it is to choose a different path even if it will save us.

It shouldn't surprise us how tough it is to make social and economic changes given how hard it is to make personal ones. Take climate change for example. I know I should walk or ride my bike, but I get in the car. I feel bad but still do it. One challenge is that brains are wired by consistency. You know the feeling of being on autopilot. It's like that because the more we do something the more we form a path in our synapses. And we can't just stop doing something by saying "no". In fact, when we focus on not doing what we don't want to do anymore, we reinforce the neural pathway. It's a quandary isn't it? So what can we do? We need to form a new neural pathway by embodying something else. It's why you chew gum to quit smoking. We enact the change in our bodies.

Faith communities can be like people. We get used to the way we do things. In this congregation we got used to needing a big space just for us, with worship being our prime task, there being lots of children and youth, most people in the neighbourhood being not just Christian, but also Protestant, our tasks done by committees, with lots of hands to help. But a new path is in front of us and it will enable us to live into G-d's realm in this moment, rather than as things were. The focus is outward, reaching out to neighbours, including those who aren't Christian, sharing this space as we build community in a multi-cultural context, together making our community a more just and inclusive place. But it's not familiar. And so we may find ourselves doing what we're used to even though our context is changed. It's why even though a committee focused structure for our governance no longer serves us well, we may be tempted to judge having a board and clusters before we've really tried it out. Fortunately, we have a history of successful change to draw on. When we started using inclusive language in worship, some were unsure but after a while they couldn't imagine singing any other words. It reminds us how we can't just think our way into something new. We need to live into it, and to live into it together.

Togetherness is important when finding new paths. Early followers of the Way didn't try making changes on their own. They formed communities to practice Jesus' way of doing things. They shared things in common, came together to pray, broke bread regardless of status, living out the no-patronage system Jesus proposed in our gospel. And though it didn't take fully, especially when Christians were no longer the overlooked and cast aside, we had a collective memory that enabled people to step forward from time to time to bring us back to Jesus' vision, be it founding monasteries, starting reform movements, calling for the end of slavery or supporting civil rights. Today we remind each other to keep lifting up human rights and more than that to uphold the rights of the planet, once again implementing Jesus' vision of inviting the overlooked to the banquet. And like Dominic in *The Long Count* knowing he can count on those around him to get him back on track, when we forget, we have each other to not just consider new ideas but to share hurts, to name our failings, and to find forgiveness as we seek to start again. Together we can keep modelling the new way of being in the world that Jesus came to teach us.

Finding a new path isn't easy, personally or collectively. We have familiar routes. But when we can take a new approach, we open ourselves to new ways of seeing, and in fact live into more just and loving ways of being. In our changing world there is a path still largely untried. May we take our map from Jesus as we seek new roads together. Amen.