



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Casting on the Other Side” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

February 10, 2019; Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

(Second Week of African Heritage Month)

Readings: Luke 5:1-11; Excerpt from Desmond Tutu’s *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*

Most of us have heard at least one. The story about the one that got away, the angler wrestling for hours with a whopper that was this, no this, no this big. We call them fish tales and today’s gospel text sounds a bit like one. After preaching from the boat of Simon aka Peter, Jesus tells them to go to deeper water, similar to John’s post-resurrection version where the risen Christ tells them to cast the net on the other side. In both cases they catch an amazing haul of fish.

Now every fish tale has a purpose. The ones we’re used to are boastful and this one’s a bit like that. Who wouldn’t be impressed by a daytime catch that nearly swamps two boats? Galilean fishers struggled, burdened as they were by high taxes. A huge catch would’ve helped a lot. But being wowed isn’t the main point. It’s a side benefit. The gospels were written after the resurrection, after the apostles had died, as communities of faith were responding to their own issues. Gospel writers have a theme to hold the story together. Luke’s in both the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles is how the message of Jesus spread, first from Galilee to Jerusalem, then after Jesus’ death, throughout the Empire, even to Rome itself. This is a call story. The key is the punchline as Jesus tells Peter, James and John they’ll fish for people. The large catch is a promise to the next generation of Christians that they’ll succeed in sharing their message and many people will be impacted by it, even though in their time it was tough going, especially with persecution.

The Bible is special to us because it keeps offering insight, so what are we meant to hear? What sticks for me is the image of deep water, or as John tells it, casting the net on the other side. The idea is to put out from shore, leave familiar surroundings, try a new approach. When the United Church had a review that among other things led us from a four court to a three council structure, there was a midpoint report called “Fishing on the Other Side”. The opening set the tone: “It is time to seek new ways of serving G-d and sharing the good news.... Setting aside our ties to the way things have been and the ways we are used to doing things may open us to new ways with G-d...” Though General Council 42 modified suggestions of the working group, the changes we made will still help us do new things, release energy for us to experiment, reach out in new ways, try innovative ministries. We see this in the decision to set aside a portion of M&S funds for new ministry initiatives. We’re being invited to cast our net on the other side, to go to deeper water.

This is what we decided when we adopted our Mission Action Plan in April. We said we wanted to become a centre for community, sharing our space and reaching out intentionally to our neighbours. When people picture church they first think of worship but for me worship is a result of and aid to our main purpose: sharing the good news, nurturing disciples, casting our net in deeper water. We

worship because we find meaning in Jesus' message and find grace in his abiding presence. We're strengthened in who we are as disciples, becoming like Jesus, sent out to live in the world according to the vision of G-d's love, blessing and justice he shared.

I read a poem recently suggesting Peter, James and John fished for people by being bait. I take that to mean people would be drawn to them because they'd been changed by knowing Jesus, not so much what they said about him but how they now lived and treated others because of him. Similarly people can get to know Jesus, his message, through us, experience the good news we try to live out. This can happen as we share these buildings, a common space that enables us to help others, and not always directly, but through what others do as they come here. Some may visit like for yesterday's Climate Change Forum or last year's Liona Boyd concert. Some may regularly attend a class or access services by an agency. But in the process they meet us, discover what we are about and meet the same Jesus who brings us meaning and calls us to live G-d's love.

We also said we want to know our neighbours. While chatting with a community minister about this he suggested we reverse the usual approach. Typically we want to talk about ourselves. Instead we need to listen, perhaps host a get together with neighbours, but the purpose is to learn about them and discover what they can offer. It's about relationships, creating space for others to know they are loved, and blessed, the core of the good news Jesus called Peter, James and John to share.

After the miraculous haul of fish, Simon confessed he was a sinner. We can hear this negatively but I invite you to hold judgment. If sharing the good news is being bait, it means letting go of hurts and hang-ups that hold us back from nurturing relationships, letting Spirit bring the healing we need to be more like the one we follow. We think of sin as personal wrong doing, but it's also systems of injustice. Peter is naming a need to be freed from systems that hold him, prevent him living the love, justice and blessing Jesus brings.

We may need the same. There may be things holding us from sharing this space and our lives. We may want to boast about the past, hold on to how things used to be, or worry how "others" will treat "our" space. As we reach out we may be biased about cultural or religious groups, or assume people aren't interested in Jesus' message, especially as we interpret it, and not see the opposite is true given the diverse group of people sitting here. Like Simon we may want Jesus to go away, but as Archbishop Tutu shared, nothing is impossible with G-d who brings order from chaos and turns suffering into a source of grace.

It may have been our changing circumstances that motivated our discernment last year but I believe the Spirit is at work through this. As we let go of the way things have been, we will discover G-d working with us in new ways. As we share not only our space but our lives, as we share the faith that gives our lives meaning, and strive to be like the Jesus we know and to live into G-d's reign both within these walls and in our neighbourhood, new people will find the same. So let's be like Peter, James and John, and trust enough to cast our nets on the other side. Amen.