



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Reconciling Opposites” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

February 17, 2019; Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

(Third Week of African Heritage Month)

Readings: Luke 6:17-26; Excerpt from Desmond Tutu’s *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*

I’m clearly a Bishop Tutu fan. The giveaway was probably quoting him two weeks in a row, from the same book. I admire his commitment to an inclusive vision of G-d's reign where even “enemies” have a place at the table. During apartheid in South Africa and in the transition to an integrated nation, he's been their soul, keeping them focused on reconciliation. His vision of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help them embrace peace rather than violence was the inspiration for Canada's TRC, an idea grounded in G-d's vision of a world where hostility, greed and poverty are turned into goodness, justice and love, where everyone knows they're family.

It’s a vision our world has struggled to embrace, not just in the past with slavery, apartheid, head tax, residential schools, etc. Even now divisiveness is the order of the day, what with a terror attack in Kashmir, Brexit rhetoric still aimed at immigrants, a state of emergency declared in the US to fund a border wall. Humans are quick to divide rather than reconcile, something I learned recently. On Monday I made a presentation to town council about a proposal to begin meetings with a land acknowledgment. It’s a common practice, including here, a way to affirm the nations who called this land home long before settlers did, to redress previous attempts at erasure of identity, a step toward living together in the way First Peoples assumed we intended. In my years working with Indigenous people I've never met anyone say settlers should leave. They just want to share the land with mutual respect, a “both-and” approach.. Yet the rebuttal to the motion was all “either-or”, that land acknowledgments show disrespect for other cultural groups, to affirm the ongoing relationship of First Nations with the land means newcomers can’t hold title to the same land. The speaker only saw an “us or them” scenario. I was shocked and saddened.

Given this, how will we ever be the one family Bishop Tutu writes about? The answer comes in what Jesus both says and does in our gospel reading this morning. He’s been up on a mountain praying where he named twelve of his followers as an inner circle. That is the first clue. What follows isn't just about Jesus, but about all of us as his disciples. When he comes down to a level place, he speaks not just to the Twelve, or a larger group of followers, but to a crowd of people who are not only from Jerusalem and Judea but also from around Tyre and Sidon. The people are not only from either end of the region but different cultures and religious backgrounds. This is a gathering of Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is all about mixing opposites. In his inner circle are a tax collector (thus a collaborator with Rome) and a Zealot (someone committed to armed resistance). He ate with “sinners” and at the end counted members of the religious elite among his followers.

This is his pattern. Everywhere around Jesus it's “both-and”, opposites as part of the whole rather than against each other. And unlike Matthew's version of this sermon, Luke's Jesus offers not just a

series of “blessed are you” but balances each with a woe. Now we could see this as polarizing, as we are wont to do, but when I consider these “blessed are you”-“woe to you” pairs in conjunction with the mixing of opposites in his inner circle and the crowd, I hear Jesus holding them in tension. He isn't saying G-d will strike down the rich anymore than there will be wealth for the poor in heaven. It reminds me of Mary's words to Elizabeth when she says G-d will lift the poor and displace the powerful. It's less a vengeful turning of the tables than a restoration of balance, the coming of equanimity so no group has privilege at the expense of another. After all later in the sermon Jesus will tell his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who abuse them.

We may live in a world that likes to keep everything in “either-or” categories but it doesn't have to be that way. To break through the impasse we are called to model ourselves after Jesus, the great Reconciler, one who is human as we are and yet through him people experience the divine. As Luke suggests his only human parent was Mary, making him male without any male DNA. Thus Jesus straddles gender. He lived in the Roman Province of Judea, at the edge of the empire and so in a land at the juncture between East and West. We may see the world in opposites, but in all Jesus was and did, he shows us that the way to peace is to embrace both. We can reconcile opposites by seeing they aren't in opposition but connected, facets of one whole. This is something Indigenous peoples model too. Every clan has a role and every person a gift. You can only come to a decision when all views are heard and everyone in the circle has been honoured. When we can see from all sides, we will find the balance which enables us to be G-d's family.

Now to really do this is hard. You'd think it would just be having a conversation but we know that can become a monologue. Even if I'm listening I may do so only as it relates to me. The peace and reconciliation we need will only come when we learn to decentre, to displace ourselves as the subject of a narrative and see the value of other viewpoints and experience. We can grow in this perspective by again taking our cue from Jesus. He went up the mountain to pray before giving his sermon. Likewise through prayer, meditation, mindfulness, whatever you want to call it, we open ourselves to another. In the end it doesn't matter what you do, but do something: practice centring prayer, walk in nature, journal an event from another's point of view, listen to music, eat mindfully, listen to a friend without a personal agenda. Whatever the practice, with time we learn to decentre, to see that we're part of something larger than any one person or group.

This weekend is Family Day, a chance to pause and be with loved ones. May we look beyond our immediate group and see the larger family we are part of. May we see in “both-ands” not just “either-ors” and so seek to reconcile rather than divide. When we do, we'll become one family. Amen.