



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Homecoming”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 31, 2019; Fourth Sunday in Lent

Reading: Luke 15:11-32; “The memories come back” by Avijeet Das

Popularly we call this homecoming story “the parable of the prodigal son”. It makes sense given that prodigality is being wasteful, and the son is that. But we betray ourselves by emphasising the young man and his decision to return home. We may even think well of him, at least the moment he came to his senses. When I consider Avijeet Das’ poem in relation to our parable, I appreciate how open ended it is. All we know is when he returns, memories come back, and the air smells the same. We don’t know if the memories are good or bad just that on arriving it’s like nothing has changed. This is significant when I consider the prodigal. I was taught his conversion came while feeding the pigs, but he rehearses a speech. The air at home smells the same and he is the same too, getting ready to con his father again, at least until the moment of his dad’s embrace.

Of course, the parable doesn’t end with him coming home. There’s another brother. We could call it “the parable of the petulant son”. The older brother is that given his reaction to the home-coming. His anger ends up directed toward his father to whom he shows as much disrespect as his younger brother had. Consider his words. “Listen!” he begins. There’s no proper address. No familial solidarity. “I slaved for you all these years” he disingenuously says. At least for some of that time he laboured for himself. The father split the land between both boys. Not told the older brother was opposed to the idea, we have cause to assume he agreed to it. Given how he speaks of his brother, perhaps the inheritance was split as a way for the two to split from each other.

Perhaps we should call it “the parable of the battling brothers”. That’s a clear undercurrent of the story. And despite my hopeful words last week about us evolving to greater inclusion, rancour is much of our experience, especially in politics. We see it in the UK as the Brexit date came and went. We see it in the US as the parties fight over the meaning of the Mueller report findings. Accustomed to provincial and federal politics being partisan, a group of us saw it municipally on Monday when a five-councillor block maneuvered an amendment to the land acknowledgment proposal, effectively defeating it. In the end I doubt they’re opposed to land acknowledgments, but rather to the proposal’s mover and seconder. To be fair the mover and seconder also voted against proposals presented by any of the block. Meeting a councillor this week I asked if there’s a way they can try to work cooperatively. “How,” he said, “when we were divided long before the last election?” That seems to be where many of us land, resigning ourselves to the division.

But that isn’t the case in today’s parable! Perhaps the best title is “the parable of the reconciling father” because in the end that’s the main point. Jesus shared his parable in reaction to the scribes and Pharisees who questioned why he ate with “sinners”. He wanted them to see an alternative to rejecting others out of hand, that instead we can follow the example of the father who was moved with deep love for both his sons. We see his love in how he must have waited on the porch for his

son day after day. We see it in how he recognized him at a distance despite how he must have looked after all he'd been through. We see it in how he was willing to humiliate himself, hiking his tunic and running to him to spare his son the anger of the villagers. He did the same for his older son, leaving the party, likely to watchful eyes, and so endured public disrespect and anger. He loves both children unconditionally, desiring only for them to see each other as family again.

As you'll note part of the love shown by the reconciling father includes humiliation. This points to what's been looming since Lent began. I am referring to Holy week and the cross. The cross is not only what Jesus endured but our path to growth and reconciliation. This path is configured to the cross because it is the way of unconditional love, and not just for the other person. If I am to reconcile with someone, I need to set aside my personal agenda. I need to do this with honesty, admitting not just my perceived agenda but my hidden motivations too. This is hard because it means loving my wounded, 'sinful' side. This is what I saw played out in "Dear Evan Hansen". All Evan wanted was to belong. As a result, he let a misunderstanding, effectively a lie, snowball and hurt a lot of people, including his mother. But that didn't matter to her. When he confessed the broken arm that was the catalyst for all that happened was from his failed suicide attempt, she held him close, reassuring him she loved all of him - the part that wanted friends, the part that was afraid to make them, the part that let a lie get out of control, the part that let go of the branch in a moment of despair.

As I love myself fully, not rejecting what I hide, I can also love the other person for all they are, not only if they move to my viewpoint, but as they firmly hold to theirs. This means really listening to what they're saying, not just enough to get ammunition to fight, but listen with my whole self, listening with my heart to what's said between the words, listening with openness to the truth they are saying. As I listen for common ground, I listen with a heart open to the likelihood the divisions I cling to are false, that neither viewpoint is right, but truth only comes in reconciling opposites. When I do this, I can accept them with love. I'm guessing few can say that they don't disagree with anyone. Perhaps then this Lent we can make a point of reconciling with someone.

Doing this is a challenge because most of us have a lot invested in our viewpoints. They are the way we shore up our identity. But in the end the boundaries we place between ourselves and others are fuzzy. As we let go of false opposites, we discover that partisan boundaries between groups, between ourselves and others, within ourselves, disappear, because everything's part of a larger whole. When Avijeet Das returned home, the bougainvillea embraced him as she'd done when he was a boy. They were one, along with the rainbow and the squirrel, and his loved ones in the rain. The unity of the poem is clear, and that is the gift of reconciliation. May this Lent be a time of growth and reconciliation for all of us. May it be a time of deep homecoming. Amen.