



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Knowing the Heart” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

April 7, 2019; Fifth Sunday in Lent

Reading: Luke 7:36-50; Excerpt from Frederick Buechner's *Telling Secrets*

It feels like déjà vu again. It may not be a parable this time but there's resonance in our reading about a woman anointing Jesus' feet with his story about two brothers and a father. The elements are there. An “older brother” type acting as arbiter of right and wrong, a penitent “sibling” with less power, between them a father figure giving forgiveness to one and inviting a change of heart in the other. I again see a theme of judgement and forgiveness given “us-them” dynamics in our world. But this was a challenge for Luke as well. Why else make significant changes to a story found in the other three gospels, shifting the location from Bethany to Galilee, the timing from near the end of Jesus' life to the start of his ministry, and most importantly recasting the host as a Pharisee who judges not the cost of the ointment but the woman's lifestyle. Given how much we face the issue too, I'd like to unpack the story, looking at where judgement begins – inside of us.

So let's start with Simon. He could be any of us. I know there are times I've been him, looking askance at others and acting as judge and jury. Which begs the question, why do we judge so readily? One theory is rooted in Carl Jung's ideas. According to him we all have aspects of our-selves we pushed into our unconscious. This shadow self is rooted in primal, more emotional parts of us like envy, greed, anger. Though it is associated with negative feelings, we push gifts away too. We begin creating the shadow very early, and need to. We can't have temper tantrums as adults if we want to get along with others. But it has an impact. When a parent sends us for a time out, we start creating our shadow self. Maybe we're playful or silly. Our teacher tells us to sit down and act our age. In our shame, the shadow grows. We may be teased for liking art rather than sports and start to see art negatively. Our shadow is part of us. It's just not acknowledged.

One way of figuring out what's in the shadow is to be attentive to traits in others that set us on edge, like Simon reacting to the woman who anointed Jesus. For example, let's say someone's always annoyed at what they think is lazy and selfish behaviour, even suggesting that they're not getting ahead because others are too self-focused to help. They're projecting. If they look at them-selves honestly, they'll find they're actually held back by their own tendency to be self-centred and passive. With this in mind, I wonder what it was about the woman that annoyed Simon. Perhaps it was her ability to be vulnerable? Maybe in a masculine environment he was shamed as a child for opening himself up, maybe punished for crying? Who knows? It could be anything. But the shadow's usually engaged when we're reacting to others. Simon is definitely in reaction mode.

In contrast, the woman in the story seems more in touch with her inner world. She feels sadness and remorse for things she has done, that there is no point denying her shadow. Frederick Buechner speaks to this as he writes how it's important to tell “the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves.” Otherwise, as he says, we may lose track of who we are and become

just an edited version of ourselves. He's speaking of never acknowledging our shadow, of affirming only the "acceptable" aspects we like to show the world. This has serious consequences. As we continue reacting out of our unacknowledged aspects, we end up hurting ourselves, those we love, ever widening circles of people. This is especially true when a society operates out of a collective shadow and projects blame on others. I referred to this a few weeks ago in terms of scapegoating. The anti-immigrant, Islamophobic diatribes that led to the Christchurch attacks are collective projection. We blame others for violence rather than honestly ace the aggression in our culture. Left unchallenged we end up with Jim Crow laws or the Holocaust, stark reminders of how important it is to seek to integrate our shadow in our lives.

So how do I do this? To start, when I face my shadow, it is important to do so from a grounded, loving place. It can be difficult to look at things I don't like about myself, so I need to be Jesus in the story and show compassion. When I was small judgments were external, but in learning what was acceptable I brought Simon inside. To do this work I need to silence him for a bit, be gentle with myself. After all the shadow is simply aspects of me I'm less comfortable with and deserve to be looked at with honesty and love. A good place to begin is with what I said about projecting. I discern my shadow through awareness of what annoys me in others. As a corollary, things I'm envious of may be connected to gifts I felt snubbed for as a child. One technique is connected to this. Make a list of strengths, take each one, consider its opposite, then ponder if it's in you. For example, perhaps you are super disciplined. You may have in you a free-spirit that could be a source of creativity. Journaling helps. Choose a trait to explore. Imagine it's a person. Talk about what bothers you about them. Approach them as a teacher and ask what they can show you.

Doing this work brings insight and helps us love. Simon was tied up inside, unable to even offer the hospitality his culture required. In contrast, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet had faced her shadow and so loved deeply. Loving others begins with treating ourselves likewise, accepting all that we are as Jesus did. He didn't care what the woman did. He focused on who she was, all she was, and loved her. Doing the same means dying to edited versions of ourselves. But in knowing our hearts with love rather than judgement, we can experience a kind of resurrection. May we do just that as we draw closer to Easter, growing in love for our full selves, shadow and all. Amen.