



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Widening Love's Embrace” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 19, 2019; Fifth Sunday in Easter

Reading: Acts 11:1-18; “The Old Pond” by Matsuo Basho

The air is still, the water of the pond like glass. Suddenly the silence is broken with a “plop”. A frog has jumped into the pond, once-placid water now moving in circles, rippling outward. This is the scene I imagined as I read Matsuo Basho’s poem. Titled in English as “The Old Pond”, it sparks many ideas with few words. No wonder Basho is considered the greatest writer of *haiku*.

To me this poem captures the main themes of the reading from Acts. We know the tale. Peter had a vision which prepared him for the Spirit descending on the household of Cornelius, a Roman, just as it had for Jesus' Jewish followers. Until that moment Peter’s view of Gentiles was like any other of his community. Despite how Jesus pushed boundaries and healed non-Jews, left on their own, Jesus’ followers maintained tradition, sharing the gospel with other Jews, venturing a little to preach to Samaritans or a Jewish eunuch from Ethiopia. The water of the pond was like glass.

But the frog jumped. The Spirit descended, G-d’s love rippling out in ever wider circles. Peter responded and Paul took it further, eventually becoming the main evangelist to the Gentiles. As he made increasing inroads with them, the tension in the beginning of the Acts passage became more pronounced. This is how it is with us. We get locked into a viewpoint, still choosing who is worthy of respect and inclusion, and who is not. Even with a dramatic rooftop vision, we shift our perspective in fits and starts. In Galatians, Paul recounts how he confronted Peter who had been eating with non-Jewish believers until a group came up from Jerusalem claiming they needed to be circumcised. Despite Peter’s intervention as we heard today, he pulled back from their inclusive table practice. Fortunately, Barnabas and Paul went to Jerusalem and the issue was resolved: Gentiles didn't need to follow the Law after all. The ripples moved outward and in the first centuries as new peoples accepted the gospel their customs were incorporated into worship.

Of course, it didn't stay that way. Just as rippling water becomes calm again, we reverted to the status quo. Like returning to bias against women despite the example of Jesus, the circle widened only so far to embrace other cultures. Here's one example. By the time trade routes reopened with Asia we'd become decidedly Eurocentric. The first missionaries to China were successful, translating the bible, adopting the dress of court officials, using insights from Confucianism to explain the gospel. But that didn't last. European practices were imposed. Even though incense was used in Europe, Asian use was considered superstitious and banned. When we pulled back from adapting to the culture, the Chinese church collapsed, only growing again in the last few decades. This happened in parallel with colonialism in Asia and other parts of the world. I won't go into the litany of wrongs that Christians accepted, even justified. We know them too well. We forgot the significance of that moment of Spirit in Cornelius’ house. Fortunately, the Spirit keeps pushing anyway, reminding us of what Jesus

taught, challenging our biases and calling us together so that despite this history, we have step by step moved forward in acceptance, crossing lines of race, gender, ability, orientation, age, belief.

But there's one line we're reluctant to cross even though it's at the heart of Peter's rooftop vision. In the blanket are animals of every kind. Peter is told not to call profane what G-d made as clean, challenging how we define not just who but what gets our respect. We give it to pets, making them family, but not most other non-humans. We claim sovereignty and biblical warrant. But the word for dominion in Hebrew has two possible roots. One is *radah* which can mean subdue. The desire to subdue nature was understandable when there weren't that many of us and technology not so powerful. Nature can be harsh, and fickle. To subdue was to survive. But *radah* is really a wheel rolling. To have dominion is to rule. But rulers lauded in the bible rolled alongside their people not over them. But as we've grown in population and technology become much more powerful, we've been literally rolling over the natural world. According to the UN Report on the planet's health, a million species are at risk of extinction, Did you know 40% of frogs and other amphibians are at risk? Frogs are indicator species. Sensitive to changes in the environment, when they die off, other species follow. The UN report revealed that 75% of the world's been impacted by human activity with 32% of forest lost, especially in the tropics, converted for export agriculture, 85% of wet-lands, essential to birds, drained for urban growth and farming, 55% of the oceans impacted by industrial fishing. Like Basho's frog jumping into a pond, our decision to treat the world mostly as profane is having a devastating ripple effect. We should try rolling alongside nature for a change.

Fortunately, there is an alternate root for the word for dominion. *Yarad* means to come down, or to lower oneself. It's about humility. It's knowing your own gifts and recognizing the gifts of others. We see this when all the animals visit the first human. We translate it as Adam naming the animals, but the Hebrew suggests conversation. The first human respected the gifts of each animal. They were teachers, helping Adam understand his purpose. The story envisions a relationship of caring and reciprocity. *Yarad* is what the Spirit did in Cornelius' home, descending on them like the disciples at Pentecost, and Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit comes to affirm, to lift up, to give honour. Called to the same, we need to widen our embrace beyond the human and respect the rights of all creation. I can only trust that Spirit will keep pushing us to do just that.

So, we come back to the pond. While sitting in silence, Basho could be aloof. But disconnection is false. The frog reminds us that we are connected, every action has an impact. I pray we'll become gentler in ours. We may not have always understood it, but Spirit keeps inviting us to see the ripples, to keep pushing boundaries and honour the relationships formed in ever widening circles of love. May we respond to Spirit's nudging and extend the circle to embrace all creation. Amen.