



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Joined Together in the Spirit”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

June 2, 2019; Pentecost Sunday

Reading: Acts 2:1-13; Some words from Mechtild of Magdeburg

Sometimes the Spirit rushes in, turning everything upside down. That's what we just heard. While Jesus' disciples and family were praying, they heard the sound of rushing wind and saw tongues of fire. Previously too scared to speak about the Risen Christ, they now had courage to tell everyone. More than that, they weren't held back by language barriers and the places where people were from were once enemies. All of that was overcome. That day everyone was joined together in the Spirit.

That's how it is sometimes. Like in 1988. When commissioners arrived at General Council in Victoria most intended to keep excluding gay men and lesbians from ministry. But in a marathon session one person after another got up and shared stories of hurt and things began to shift. We made our decision to accept all people into membership, including ordered ministry, regardless of sexual orientation. In 2008 this inclusion was extended to people who identify as transgender. At General Council last summer, the Spirit's wind again rushed in when an intercultural observer made an impassioned speech about the experience of racialized people at the meeting. Following a motion for an apology, another marathon began as people of colour and Indigenous people came to the mic. We left with deeper understanding of who we really are. It was Pentecost in those General Councils as Spirit drew us together across race, culture, orientation and identity.

Of course, Spirit doesn't usually rush in through wind and flame. More often she works slowly, like two people gradually becoming friends. This is the tone of Mechtild of Magdeburg as she reminds us how the Spirit is Love, apart from us yet also part of us, like a harpist and her strings together creating sound. The Spirit works gently because while love may need to speak truthfully it doesn't force. Case in point, as United Church we rightfully pride ourselves on the apologies made to Indigenous people for imposing European culture in the guise of Christianity, especially through Indian Residential Schools. We were the first to do so in 1986 and made a more specific apology regarding residential schools in 1998. But did you know Alberta Billy of Wei Wai Kai First Nation in BC, stood before church leaders in 1981 and asked for an apology for our part in residential schools? It may have been just five years before we made the first apology, but it took twelve more before we addressed the basis of her plea. We've made strides but quite slowly.

The shift's even slower in broader Canadian society. We congratulate ourselves for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which crossed the country hearing testimony of survivors of Indian Residential Schools. But did you know it wasn't government funded? It was funded by survivors. They asked that part of their legal settlement be set aside for a process of truth-telling, knowing that only hearing the pain of the past would bring any hope of future reconciliation. That's what Indigenous peoples want. A healed relationship based on respect. It's why there were calls for an Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls. Unlike the TRC, this government funded Inquiry was fraught with difficulties and accusations of government interference. The report to be released tomorrow may disprove those concerns, highlighting how racism and colonial bias plagues Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples. Hopefully the accusation of genocide may shake us into real change. Love needs to say things we don't want to hear.

But as I said, while we sometimes need prophetic challenge, more often the Spirit slowly stirs hearts toward change. I may mourn the seventeen years it took for us to apologize for Indian Residential Schools and the abuses there; I may wish a reset of Canada's relationship with the Indigenous community as well as racialized people and others was happening more quickly, but deep and lasting change takes time. It takes time because it hinges on relationships. What opened my heart were the friendships I formed in my years of ministry with Indigenous peoples.

But to get to friendship we may need to do previous work. Often the barriers we erect between groups begin with the barriers formed inside us. I am more likely to judge others because deep down I'm insecure, a feeling often rooted in childhood hurt and trauma. That certainly is the case for me. Right relations with others begins with personal healing and this is the gift of the Spirit. We've been taught to see G-d as distant but the genius of Christianity (too bad we ignored it) is that G-d is close. The whisper prompting me to say hello to a stranger or make peace with some-one is Spirit at work. She calls me out of myself but first helps me face my wounds. In personal truth-telling space is opened for inner reconciliation that in turn makes healing of relationships possible. It takes time, and some work. Journaling can help as we choose to understand rather than ignore the judgements we make. We can befriend our inner child. Start a dialogue through a letter or offer affirmations like "I love you. I hear you. Thank you. I'm sorry" during meditation. Have an honest conversation with a friend. We owe it to ourselves and others to seek healing.

On this Pentecost may we continue to open ourselves to the gift of the Spirit, sometimes rushing in and powerfully removing barriers and clearing the way for new life, but most often slowly softening hearts through relationships of love and mutual understanding. As we open ourselves to her prompting, everyone will be joined together. May we accept her love and grace. Amen.