



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Setting a Place at the Table” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

June 16, 2019; Pride Sunday

Reading: Luke 5:27-32; Excerpt from speech by Rabbi Adam Rosenwasser

Imagine this. A friend invites you to come along with a group to a dinner party. You assume the home you're going to is expecting you. Little do you know your friend didn't tell the hosts they were bringing extra people. When you arrive, it's clear everything's been set for a set number. The hosts say you're welcome, add chairs. But you feel everyone's discomfort, even antagonism. Now consider another party. This time everything is set and extra guests are expected. There is plenty of room. Wanting you to be at ease the hosts seat you with someone with whom they feel you have things in common. They even make sure that a name card has been placed for you.

Such a difference. I know which party I'd want to be at, but I also know too often it can feel like the other, especially in churches. Ironic given that in our reading this morning Jesus affirms we are meant for the second experience. No need for distinctions of who is in and who is not. Those who are sneered at and judged have a place at the table, and not just as an after thought. Jesus lifts them up. And why not? As Rabbi Rosenwasser suggests we're all divine sparks, whether others see us as that or not. In coming together we experience more godliness.

As we heard, Jesus had opponents, in this case the Pharisees, who disagreed with this version of godliness. They believed they needed to stand apart rather than come together as they held onto a strict purity code. To them it was tax collectors and others who didn't meet their standard of godliness. In many faith contexts today it's 2SLGBTQ+ people. Case in point, the Vatican recently released teaching guidelines for schools that are decidedly transphobic. People look to a line here or there in the bible and miss its overall message. In trying to keep biblical or doctrinal purity they overlook real people who are hurting, pushed away from the table and made to feel unloved. You hear “everyone's welcome” but know they had a set number of seats in mind. Adding extra places would mean rubbing shoulders with real people not caricatures. Thank God for affirming congregations like this one, places where everyone is not just welcome but included, and loved.

You may have heard the news that the Presbyterian Church in Canada voted at their General Assembly to ordain 2SLGBTQ+ candidates as well as to allow ministers to officiate same gender weddings. The proposal is what is called a remit and so will still need to go to presbyteries for approval. No matter what happens next, the vote was historic. I certainly never thought they'd get to this point. They have been very divided on this for many years, one of the issues being the interpretation of scripture. Traditionalists point to historical interpretations of various passages, but others maintain that's not really fidelity to scripture, just their learned bigotry. Rabbi Rosenwasser reminds us, bigotry wants us in our shells, kept apart. Instead we need to come together.

We can do this by listening to one another. Unfortunately, as a Presbyterian friend tells me, for too long they were only listening to the traditionalist side, fearful becoming an inclusive church would tear them apart. At the meeting they came to a compromise similar to what the UCC did in '88, offering an opt out based on conscience. This may keep the Presbyterian church together, but we know too well how that can lead to 2SLGBTQ+ folks still feeling marginalized in their church, feeling like uninvited guests. Rainbow Communion (like our Affirm) has been ready to be part of a dialogue since 2003. The General Assembly passed an historic proposal but still has not listened to hundreds of stories from 2SLGBTQ+ people compiled by Rainbow Communion. My friend wondered aloud why they talk of saving the church but not the lives of people rejected by it? They aren't alone in this. The UCC can be like that too, more focused inward than out.

This makes me think I need to reframe my dinner party. It's important to create safe spaces where everyone knows they're sparks of light and love but why not go outside for a picnic? We can keep making more and more space as we meet new people and reach out to those who needed to step away. And step away they did, sometimes creating their own dinner parties so to speak. We can be a support system to these parties, bringing more food, doing a drinks run. Some of those "parties" are here - PFLAG, Aids Committee of York Region, My House. What can we do to affirm their work? We also need to look for folks who are hurt, isolated, alone. How can we support youth rejected by families? A high number of homeless youth are gay or trans. How can we support older adults who just came out, often not able earlier due to the messages of churches and other faith groups? And there are folks who yearn to be part of churches like this one, part of the second dinner party I asked you to imagine, but want more, want to plan the party and compile their own guest list, to have a "picnic" for 2SLGBTQ+ folks wanting to explore spirituality in a mostly queer space. When I was in Edmonton, we formed a monthly gathering, many from communities that had hurt them. They came together because they needed space to heal.

We need all kinds of spaces, places where we can grow strong, where we can affirm that we are all sparks of the divine, so we can feel confident to come together to confront bigotry. We know too well that the world still isn't safe. I'm sure you read about the two women on a bus in London beaten up by five young men. You also would have heard that it was not just Indigenous women and girls who have been murdered and missing but two spirited people as well. And let's not forget that our concerns about men going missing in the Village were not taken seriously for too long. We have a lot of work to do and can do it together.

No matter what kind of dinner party it may be, with name cards, on a picnic blanket, in a mixed space or separate so folks can heal, we all want a place we know we're loved, supported, belong. This worship service, the parade, the community fair are expressions of just that. May we keep creating these spaces, where divine sparks come together, shining bright, creating a light of hope. Amen.