



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Staying the Course” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

June 30, 2019; Third Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 9:51-62; “Perseverance” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

We often think of Jesus as loving and compassionate and so can be taken aback when he’s harsh. Yet that’s how he comes across this morning. You’d think he’d be supportive if someone says yes to his invitation to discipleship. But he says “Let the dead bury their own dead” to someone who wants to bury a loved one, and to someone who wants to say good-bye to family claims they are unfit for the kingdom because they aren’t facing forward at the plough. Talk about a buzzkill!

Yet I sympathize. He’s making clear you can’t take up his call lightly. It takes dedication. After all he’s on his way to Jerusalem where he’ll face opposition a hundred times worse than what he received far from the centre of power. He needs them to know they can’t turn back when things get tough. Failure to keep focused on the plough will mean a furrow either wobbly or too shallow or both. How are you to bring in a harvest if you don’t prepare properly, and as Goethe suggests, willing to do so with tears? And what are they trying to grow? Not the thorny experience of the world, to continue with Goethe’s imagery. Jesus was calling them to plant flowers of peace and justice, communities of support for all, with traditional enmities ended and with those judged unworthy welcomed as part of the family. That would require strength and perseverance

Case in point, James’ and John’s earlier suggestion to call down fire on a Samaritan village. Jesus rightly rebuked their overreaction to the Samaritans’ inhospitality. And why assume it was rejection? Jesus had set his mind to go to Jerusalem. Perhaps he simply chose to press on? But James and John assumed his decision was rooted in a shared hatred of Samaritans. Given those entrenched ideas, he needed to make clear to all potential followers that they couldn’t give in to the temptation to turn from the more just and loving world G-d called them to, not because of opposition, and certainly not due to the inertia of established religious and political practice.

Students of history know too well the strength of that inertia. After only a few generations Jesus’ reform movement had become the church, with religious hierarchy even though he healed people without recourse to Temple priests, with the same moralizing for which he criticized Pharisees, with the sidelining of women’s leadership even though he called them as disciples. Fortunately, we had course corrections, and not just once. As the church aligned with power, the desert fathers and mothers went to the wilderness to dedicate themselves to prayer; later, in monasteries, men and women formed communities and shared everything in common; as monasteries became corrupted with wealth and power, lay movements popped up with people dedicating themselves to the poor; in the Reformation our predecessors reclaimed the priesthood of all believers; later on again our Methodists sisters and brothers put the gospel into action by tackling the social issues of their day.

Time and again we turned our hands back to the plough and I believe in many ways we are in another course reset. These resets often creep up on us and this is no different. Christians have been shrinking as a percentage of population since the turn of the last century, but it was masked by the baby boom of the 50s and 60s. We invested in extensions to buildings to accommodate all the children and teens, and not just with classrooms but gyms and halls. This isn't a judgement. It made sense at the time. But as the decline grows apparent, many communities of faith find them-selves over-housed, not unlike in our housing crisis with young people unable to afford a house and seniors in houses larger than their needs. We need creative solutions, like people choosing to co-house, even across generations with some seniors downsizing in their home so a young family can move into the rest. That's like what we discerned to do. Rather than turn around, convinced all we need is this idea or that program to have the church of the 50s and 60s again, we recognize that our neighbourhood has changed. and we can use our large space in service of others. Like families doing this for practical reasons and discovering they appreciate the mutual support and cross-generational wisdom, we'll find that what began as a pursuit in long term viability is the Spirit inviting us to a new phase of ministry where we create space for new connections to be born, where we can do more together as various groups offer each other support and wisdom.

This is but one part of our discernment. We also felt called to go out and connect with our neighbours. And why shouldn't we? We may think churches are buildings but that's just where the church gathers. Our ministry is to keep planting flowers of justice, cooperative living and radical welcome. We need to because it is clear society needs a reset too. When settlers came to North America, they talked of being a city on a hill. As I shared earlier, ironically they had an example in front of them. While not perfect, First Nations made sure everyone had enough. Governance was democratic. Iroquois was a confederacy of six nations under the Great Law of Peace. But being human, the newcomers, looked back to where they came from and so brought the hierarchy and inequality they'd known. In spite of that, on both sides of the border we've made great strides for democracy, gender equality and civil rights. This weekend is fifty years since the Stonewall Riot that brought the beginning of advocacy for 2SLGBTQ+ people. Maybe we picked up Indigenous perspectives after all. But the human tendency is to look back and we see this in the rise of white supremacy, attempts to unravel women's rights, pushbacks on gay and trans rights, threats to the universal programs of support that we cherish. We can't tackle all of this from inside these walls.

Our discernment to share this space with others has a purpose. Together as people of various faiths, and none in particular, we are being called into the street to partner with anyone who is planting flowers rather than thorns. Jesus warned would-be disciples for a reason. There will be tears before there is laughter, but this is where the church has always been called. As in Jesus' time, we're in the midst of a reset as a church and in need of one as a society. So together let's put our hands to the plough. We won't look back. We will stay the course. May it be so. Amen.