



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Peace Beyond Borders” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

July 7, 2019; Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 10:1-11; Excerpt from sermon delivered by Archbishop Oscar Romero, January 7, 1978

I'm starting to think Jesus isn't as meek and mild as I was taught growing up. For a second week in a row we hear challenging words. He commissions seventy-two of his disciples to go ahead of him to the surrounding villages to share a word of peace. But then he says peace will come back to them if they are not welcomed. In that case they are to stand at the end of the village and wipe the dust off their feet. He goes on to say in a bit omitted from the lectionary that it would have gone better for Sodom! Is he wishing fire when he rebuked James and John for the same thing?

Despite this, I need a harsh Jesus given everything going on in the world right now, especially at the US-Mexico border. His words of judgement while referencing the mythical city of Sodom fit because it wasn't struck down because of homosexuality as many of us were taught. If you read Ezekiel it's clear the people were punished for their greed and arrogance, for their injustice to the poor and failing to honour the law of welcoming strangers. According to the Talmud they had beds for visitors in which those too short would be stretched to fit and those too tall have their legs lopped off. That's extreme inhospitality, albeit from a myth. But what's going on right now surely isn't!

Rather than reverse their actions at the international outcry from a few months ago, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers have doubled down on separating children from their parents. There is a policy against hugging in detention centres being applied not just to officers not being able to comfort children, but children, often siblings, not being able to comfort each other. Lack of human contact can do irreparable harm to developing brains. There are children being denied blankets and sleeping on concrete floors, despite there being centres set up for them and some of these specialized units housing adults instead. The situation doesn't have to be this crisis. Asylum seekers could be released under community supervision, the jurisdictional squabbles supposedly part of all this set aside so children can be cared for or simply keep parents and children together. But why offer compassion when you have dehumanized the people who are seeking your help?

Even acts of compassion have been criminalized. Migrants who slip across the border have to trek the arid landscape of the Southwest. Over the years people established a practice of leaving packages of water and food. Border patrols turned a blind eye, even offered encouraging words. Now those caught helping “illegals” are arrested, tactics copied from far-right regimes in Europe. The irony of all this is that the nations people are fleeing are corrupt and unstable in large part because of US policy. Don't get me wrong. These nations have endemic problems. But the Cold War policies of the past combined with present pro-corporate agendas have contributed to the migrant crisis. People don't want to leave their homes. But when left with no other option, they'll take an arduous, often deadly journey, at the end of which they need compassion and not to be treated like criminals. I guess Jesus really was sending the disciples as lambs among wolves!

Despite what we're seeing in the US as well as ongoing crises in Sudan, Venezuela, Syria, West Papua, and other parts of the world, we can't be wolves among wolves. We still need to be lambs by taking seriously Jesus' advice to the seventy-two disciples. That's the only way forward. So, what does he say? First, he instructs them to take just the clothes on their backs. He was inviting them to total dependency. He wanted them to nurture community with whomever they visited. They were to eat what was put in front of them, not to worry about dietary laws or other customs. They were to be a family. This is why words of peace were so important. *Shalom* is a greeting, like *buenos dias*, *aniin*, or *hello*, but more than that it's a wish for harmony, an end to animosity and greed, and the start of a world described by Oscar Romero as the "generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all". This is a world opposite to one where you carry a bag and purse and don't need help from strangers, opposite to one where you fear someone from another place because you believe there's only so much to go around. The people of Sodom loathed strangers, afraid they were thieves in disguise planning to take their wealth. The rhetoric we hear about refugees and immigrants, and not just in the US, is rooted in the same. But the world that reflects G-d's Reign is one without that fear. Jesus commissioned seventy-two disciples and not just the Twelve, twelve standing for Israel but seventy-two for all the nations of the world. The Reign of G-d they were to announce, and us to announce as well, is rooted in a peace that crosses borders.

So does peace beyond borders mean we need to go to the US-Mexican border or another troubled part of the world? For some it may. But we also need to bring that same vision of peace wherever we are, especially since that fear of strangers is also present here. We begin by nurturing *shalom* in ourselves, growing to appreciate being "made in G-d's image" means G-d's Spirit is present within us. We claim sacred worth, not by what we do or make, but simply by being ourselves. We then extend the same to ever wider circles, not treating others as objects upon which we act, but sacred subjects with whom we are to be fully and peacefully present, G-d's Spirit flowing between us. The other person may not recognize this, but we don't react. We accept it, brushing dust off our sandals, that is not letting it weigh us down but moving forward knowing everyone, even "enemies", and everything, is a gift of presence and part of G-d's *shalom*. Then if we do have a chance to go to the border, or join a protest, or help someone in crisis, we respond as lambs and not wolves, confident we're rooted in love and not continuing the divisions we struggle against.

When I consider Jesus' advice to the seventy-two, I realize he wasn't harsh. He was just strong, and at the same time supportive, challenging, and compassionate. May we be the same as we go to bear peace, sharing welcome, nurturing community in a world often antagonistic to these gifts. May we challenge what needs to be, compassionate even to enemies, and always living *shalom*. Amen.