



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Cost and Gain” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

September 8, 2019; Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 14:25-33; Selection from “Letting Go” by Jennifer Williamson (www.healingbrave.com)

Here we go again. Perhaps I’m getting less idealistic as I get older, but Jesus’ words are sounding harsher to me. I’m not worthy of being a disciple if I don’t hate my parents? Aren’t I supposed to honour them? I’m not worthy of following him if I don’t give up my possessions? That’s doable if I’m traipsing around Asia in my twenties but I’m in my fifties and worrying if I’ll have enough for retirement. Then there’s the cross. Ironically martyrdom always seems more appealing to the young than someone on my side of the hill. How old are the people he was speaking to anyway?

He sounds harsh in our context, but in his context... Jesus sounded even worse. To us family is important, but in his day, they were life and death. Generally, we’re self-supporting. My brother doesn’t rely on my contacts. My sister is fine in Alberta on her own. But in Jesus’ place and time we would need each other to survive. Consider the last two weeks of readings. Jesus was eating meals with Pharisees, rubbing shoulders with a higher class than you’d expect given his background. As I shared last Sunday, his world ran on patronage. To feed your family you networked with those slightly above you. But the system perpetuated inequality. Hence Jesus’ advice to his host last week to invite to a banquet the people the system had cast aside. That was a way to confront the injustices that hurt so many. But to do this you weren’t the only one at risk. Without patrons your family could lose everything. Suddenly Jesus’ words are not just idealism. He’s warning potential disciples of the cost of following him. Like the tower builder or the ruler going to war, they’d better consider well before making a commitment to him and to G-d’s realm of justice he was trying to bring.

He is warning us too. He invites us to consider what we’re willing to risk to make present the realm of G-d. I hope I’m not alone in feeling unsure. There’s a part of me that doesn’t want to risk. I prefer the promise of a transformed world without changing much personally. In many ways I feel like a trapped monkey. Do you know the image? Apparently, you can trap a monkey by baiting a container with an opening just wide enough for its hand to go in. When the monkey grabs the bait its fist is wider than the opening. It could be free if it let go of the bait, but it won’t. The desire for what’s in its hand is too strong. As I watched the news this weekend and I saw the devastation wrought in the Bahamas by Hurricane Dorian, I felt like that, trapped by not wanting to change much even though driving my car, still eating a good deal of meat, not paying enough attention to how far my food travels, means a warmer Atlantic Ocean and stronger storms. My commitment to G-d’s realm needs to extend to the people of the Caribbean as Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, pointed out: “We are on the frontline of the consequences of climate change but we don’t cause it. And the

vulnerability that attaches therefore to us is a matter we're trying to get the international community to deal with consistently... People say the words and hear you, but they don't follow through." She's right but I still refuse to pull my hand free for her sake.

For me the reality of that refusal reminds me that Jesus' invitation to be in service of G-d's realm is intended for our hearts and not just for our heads. He invites us to look more deeply than surface changes. It's like going on a diet. If I don't look at why I overeat, once I reach my goal weight chances are it will all come back. I need to understand what holds me from living with a greater degree of love and compassion, recognizing that what motivates my decisions will not be the same for others. Take anti-refugee sentiment for example. Someone may hold to the myth of the self-made person and see a refugee as coming for a handout, while another may be gripped by anger over job losses and need to blame someone. Each person is holding to something and so their hands are closed to reaching out with greater love and care. And ironically, my full support of refugee policy may prevent me from seeing some of the concerns and hold me from taking the time to learn where their feelings come from. I too end up not reaching out with compassion.

In the end it is about letting go. Jennifer Williamson's poem speaks to this. She writes of putting what she's holding onto on hold so she can accept what is rather than hold to what was, to let go of the ties that pull her away from peace. She's speaking about her brother's death but it reminds me how easily we can get stuck. I listened to a podcast with some good advice here. The host spoke of how we think happiness comes from what we add to our lives – the most recent iPhone, a new relationship, a vacation, when it actually comes from subtraction, from letting go of whatever holds us from happiness – a grudge, an unfulfilled goal, negative self-talk. Her words hit home. I know I don't take enough time to listen to my dad with compassion. I'm stuck. I'm having trouble with the shifted role, and know he is too. I see him as someone who looked after me but now he needs my help. In my head I see who he is, but my heart... I doubt I'm alone in this kind of experience.

Thank goodness I'm not. One of the gifts of Jesus' call to us as disciples is that it is in the plural. He doesn't call us alone but into community to encourage each other. He may tell us we are to hate our family, but he's inviting us to see where our allegiances lie. As we join our hearts to him and to his path of love, justice and peace, he invites us to hold to a new family, other disciples to help us on the way. Now what motivates us may vary from person to person but there's enough shared wisdom that we can help each other let go of whatever may need to. Sometimes I need spiritual help if I'm going to open my hands in love. But through Spirit there can be healing, made possible by the love shared as we pray for one another. Jesus promised to be with us, and I trust in the grace of that promise.

So while there is a cost in following him that Jesus challenges us to recognize, in the end we gain much more. May we look to one another then as we strive to let go of whatever we're holding, with Christ as our companion, we will be able to open our hands in compassion and love for all. Amen.