



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Solidarity Song” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

January 26, 2020; Third Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Matthew 5:1-12; “His Loud Voice” by Samantha Reynolds

Preaching familiar bible readings like today's can be a challenge. We stop paying attention and the words just wash over us. The Beatitudes are particularly challenging because they also don't seem to make sense, especially with the traditional rendering of “blessed are” or “happy are” rather than “honoured” as today's version reads. It's a blessing to grieve? I should be happy to be oppressed and so hungry for justice (which is what righteousness means)? The wording was intentional, meant to turn assumptions about how the world works on their heads. This is why the children are in Centennial Hall right now making pineapple upside down muffins.

Part of the challenge is we try to make sense of each statement when we should also look at them as a whole. When we do we see patterns. One pattern is that there are two main groupings. The first is four situations of hurt, insecurity, struggle. The poor in spirit (namely those feeling hopeless, mourners, the humble (also known as meek), those who hunger for justice. The next group aren't situations but actions. Showing mercy, not clinging to the world, peace-making, striving for justice. Together they name the situation of Jesus' world and a response. It's a call to solidarity.

At this point I'd like to share why the reading says “heavenly empire” not “kingdom of heaven”. We're used to hearing kingdom or reign, but the Greek *basilea* is empire. Early Christians would have heard a contrast between their experience of the Roman Empire, which for many brought forth their cries of hopelessness, loss, and powerlessness in the face of their oppression, and the alternative to which Jesus pointed, heard him singing a vision of a world where people show mercy and compassion, seek peace from a place of inner harmony, struggle for justice despite the cost to themselves. Much of the imperialist systems of injustice they faced are still at play.

We're reminded of this in “His Loud Voice”. Media have shifted attention to the impeachment trial but parents and children continue to be split up at the border with Mexico. Last year almost 70,000 children were detained and the caravans keep coming north. The children are like the first Beatitudes group: hopeless, grieving, meek, hungry for the justice of being with their parents. As Samantha wrote “god knows those children need warmth”. And they're not alone. This week was International Holocaust Remembrance Day. We must heed the call of “never again” as evidenced by the rise in anti-Semitic violence. I was listening to CBC on Friday and a mom called to share how the teasing of her daughter quickly turned to hate speech and threats of violence. G-d knows that girl needs warmth. Our hearts rightly still break over Flight 752. Fifteen of those killed were children. We came together to remember all those lost yet in 1982 we failed to do the same when Air India Flight 182

exploded over the Atlantic. Of 307 killed, 82 were under 13. It was written off by the government of the time as a foreign disaster even though the bombs were planted by Canadians and many who died were from this country. But they were seen as just Indians who brought their feud to Canada. There are enough videos of hostile encounters to remind us that racism is still with us. G-d knows those who lost loved ones on Flight 182 need warmth and love.

A key statement is “G-d knows...” We often gloss over the opening: Jesus went up the mountain. There are a few meanings, but significant today is how mountains are associated with the divine. As Jesus goes up the mountain, he stands between heaven and earth. In that moment he expresses the divine in solidarity with us, especially those hurting and in need. We see this divine solidarity in scripture as prophets call down those who hurt widows and orphans. When in Matthew 25 the Son of Man lauds those who fed, clothed, visited the least for serving him, he isn’t praising them for visiting a person of means, but the forgotten, overlooked, despised. Known as the preferential option for the poor, this is essential to our Methodist roots. John Wesley focused on reaching out to those the established church ignored: miners, the urban poor, criminals, and in the US, those held in slavery.

This is what religion is about. Andre Henry, a writer, musician, anti-racism activist and former managing editor of “Relevant Media” speaks to this in *The God of the Ghetto*. Raised in a mostly white congregation, and trained in a mainly white seminary, he kept on being challenged when he said G-d cares about the liberation of black peoples. Colleagues claimed he was misrepresenting the gospel, that G-d only cares about our souls. Why then, Henry asks, did G-d rescue the Israelites from slavery, noting that when the cloud of darkness came it didn’t just cover Pharaoh but all Egypt except the Israelite ghetto? They were all complicit. So we need to do the reverse, to join in Jesus’ song and stand in solidarity with all who are hurting, oppressed.

We saw this in action two weeks ago as 3,000 gathered in Oak Ridges not just to remember those who died in Flight 752 but those left behind. We see it in people pushing for justice for detainees at the border, and in the countries they’re fleeing. We see it extended to the other than human as people risk themselves to help wildlife caught in bushfires. I see it here as we help a refugee who is coming via Rainbow Railroad, form a strong relationship with CAYR, create welcome space for clients of the Krasman Centre, give meals to children through the Breakfast Club, show our seniors at the hospital that they’re loved by leading worship. And as we work to share space in a centre for community. I’m proud of what we’re doing and think our Methodist ancestors are too.

Solidarity must be ongoing. It’s key to the heavenly empire Jesus invites us to live into, the foundation of the freedom, the redemption we experience in him, not just as individuals but in a more just and loving world. With this in mind, I’d like to end with a solidarity song, or more to the point, Redemption Song. In this version musicians from around the world, from Jamaica to India, BC to Cape Verde join voices and instruments in solidarity, singing what the world can be.

Listen to “Redemption Song” by Bob Marley and covered by Playing for Change.

Amen.