



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Know Your Heart” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

February 9, 2020; Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Matthew 5:21-37; A Quote of Nelson Mandela; “The Door” by Jessie Belle Rittenhouse

As I shared in “Learning Together”, the United Church is inviting people to mark “Have a Heart Day”. Through this child and youth-led reconciliation campaign begun by the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, Canadians send valentines to the PM as a call to fully fund services for Indigenous children so that all children have what they need to grow up safely at home, get a good education, be healthy and proud of who they are. You’ll have a chance to make a valentine, as well as sign one to send to DFC High School. We need to have a heart for others.

We also need to know our hearts. This is the main point of the portion of the Sermon on the Mount Zoe read earlier. This section is known as “the antitheses”. Each statement opens with Jesus saying “You have heard it said...” followed by “but I say to you...” They aren’t really antitheses though, as if Jesus is replacing each part of the Law with something new. Why would he? Last Sunday we heard him say he hadn’t come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. We are sometimes surprised by this because historically the church has acted like Jesus wasn’t Jewish, preferring a whitewashed version espousing European values. But he was deeply rooted in his culture and spirituality and so draws on it, inviting his listeners to explore the heart of each statement from the Law, and in the process to explore their own hearts as well.

So, let’s consider a couple of statements to see what Jesus is getting at, starting with what he says about committing adultery in one’s heart. Initially, I bristle at the statement. It seems idealistic. After all many of us have heard, if not used, the saying “I may be married, but I’m not dead.” We’re really saying as adults that sexual attraction is normal and natural. True enough. But what Jesus is inviting us to consider is what a prof once called the morality of the second glance. The challenge is really that of objectification, where I begin to treat the other person, regardless of my or their gender, as a source of gratification. I don’t see them as a whole person with whom I am, even without knowing them, in a subject to subject relationship, but as a commodity. When we see each other this way, not just in terms of sexuality but in economics, education, politics, whatever it may be, community relationships break down as we think in terms of self-interest.

This is where, as I said to the children, we need to “have a heart”, that is consider the needs of the person before me, consider who they are, the web of relationships of which they are a part, their hopes, fears, and want what’s best for them and not just myself. But to get there I need to “know my heart”, that is know my needs, feelings, motivations, all the things that influence my behaviour, often subconsciously. I need to be in charge of my feelings and can’t blame someone else. There’s a story about the Prophet Mohammed that speaks to this. While travelling, he and a companion stopped to

rest. At the oasis was a beautiful woman. His companion kept ogling her and commented how she should dress more modestly. Rather than agree, the Prophet Mohammed challenged his friend to be in control of his eyes, and of his heart. This is opposite to what many of us would expect. We look at the tradition of modesty for women in Islam and forget it's supposed to apply to men as well. The purpose is to see the other for who they are and not as an object. This is in contrast, I assume you've heard about this, to the pastor who is suing the NFL because the performance by Jennifer Lopez and Shakira was supposedly "a threat to his eternal soul". We laugh and yet also know that for too long men have blamed women for their feelings and actions, when both begin in our hearts. This is why the #metoo movement is so important, reframing relationships and calling us all to mutual respect.

I believe that a call to respectful relationships is at the core of the first so-called "antithesis" as well. Jesus invites us to consider not just physical murder but to once again know our hearts and see the anger, the unforgiven wrong, the prejudice that motivates how we treat others. As he raises the bar on how we worship, inviting us to reconcile with someone before making an offering at the altar, he's inviting us to see that worship is not just personal spirituality. I hear his challenge to shift from making decisions mainly based on self-interest but on shared interest, to remember in my choices that the flourishing of one is dependent on the flourishing of all.

Though we live in a world that forgets this, seeing others as expendable as long as I have what I need, I have hope. It seems we increasingly want choices, to quote Nelson Mandela, that are based on love not fear. For example, I was encouraged by the number of men and not just women telling off the pastor suing the NFL, reminding him that he could have turned off the TV. The number of non-Indigenous groups supporting "Have a heart day" tells me the view of Canadians is shifting. People are willing to call out the government for underfunding Indigenous communities for health, education, social services, drinking water; they now understand that the flourishing of Indigenous communities and the rest of Canada are tied together. Similarly, honouring Black History Month. There's growing frustration with how history is whitewashed, that we need to lift up the contributions of black peoples to ensure that the prejudice that defined previous centuries doesn't mark this one. It comes at the cost of black lives. Again, the flourishing of people of colour and all people go together.

Jesus' words are a challenge. He invites us to go beyond considering what we do, or even fail to do, and dig into the heart of our motivation. It's a call to self-knowledge. Without it we are like the protagonist in "The Door", trying to open locked doors without a key. Instead, through the Spirit we find the insight needed to move past self-interest. It isn't easy but we're not alone. We are here to help each other. It begins with the Spirit. In spiritual practice, prayer and reflection, we begin to know our hearts, but we don't stop there. In graced community we create space for people to grow. We turn to a friend, perhaps seek out spiritual direction, are encouraged to find a therapist. Someone we trust may even call us out. It can hurt but at times we need a wakeup call.

In the end it is about the heart, having a heart for each other, and seeking to know our own. But through the Spirit we not only stop going solo, no longer unaware of how our self-interest shapes us, but discover we're in it together, and together will find the door leading to refuge and light. Amen.