



Richmond Hill Reflections

“A Changed Perspective” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 22, 2020; Fourth Sunday in Lent

Reading: John 9 (selected verses); Excerpt from Og Mandino’s Scroll II of *The Greatest Salesman of the World*

It’s been a week, depending on when you started ‘sheltering in place’ in earnest, and for many, me included, it’s not been an easy adjustment. One thing I’ve noticed as this becomes a new normal is that I see things I didn’t before. Like how 2 metres seems to shift. It seems really far at times yet at others nowhere near far enough. I’ve a new awareness of how much I touch my face (a lot). After watching a video of someone from Italy giving advice, I look at surfaces in a new way, including shoes. And I see the world differently. At times I see it with alarm. Two people walk by I and question why they’re together, forgetting they may be from the same home. I tilt from there to compassion, especially in regard to home bound seniors. And I see the world with renewed wonder. As I take Finley for a walk, I see the advance of Spring, and this gives me hope.

I need that hope. And I need to see as Og Mandino did, who shares how approaching the day with love helps him “love the sun for it warms [his] bones; yet... love the rain for it cleanses [his] spirit.” I need to honour sun and rain because when I consider the possibility of a long sheltering time, I feel sad, worried, frustrated. All these emotions are OK. What we’re experiencing is hard, and for some it’s devastating. I’m reminded of Richard Rohr’s words posted this week in RHUC Reflections. He invites us to see this as solidarity in suffering. He’s writing about compassion, at its root suffering with another. The solidarity we feel in this crisis can move us to love beyond our own circle to embrace the world. Our hearts open to the unity we share, not just a common situation, but spiritually, and we feel the call to look after each other.

Sadly, not everyone feels this way. Just the opposite. Some scaremonger and scapegoat instead. Like President Trump referring to the Chinese virus, or a senator claiming they don’t need social distancing in his state because not many people of Asian descent live there, or a preacher making the inevitable claim this is G-d’s judgement for “fill in the blank”, or a radio show guest alleging self-isolation was ordered in San Francisco because the mayor is protecting all the “gays” who are more vulnerable to infection (we’re not by the way).

I’m disappointed by this but not surprised. Scapegoating is a mechanism always there below the surface. We may not see it at play, but we use it to hold the community together. One group blames another for its troubles and in the process solidifies its identity. We all do it. I’m not a fan of social conservatives, but if I start saying all our problems will go away if they just go away, then I’m scapegoating. We especially fall into this when we’re scared. We see it in the gospel when the disciples ask if it was the man’s sin or his parents’ that caused his blindness, and when the Pharisees

cast him out for challenging them. Jesus' contemporaries believed physical circumstance was a sign of divine blessing or curse. They sought a cause where there was none. This is at play when people claim COVID-19 is a judgement. It's somehow more comforting to blame someone than accept that we all experience suffering regardless of status. This is the opposite of compassion, instead wanting to be set apart. We see this in those partying for Spring Break. It comes crashing down when we realize we aren't special after all. Then turning the blame inward, assume we're being punished.

Thankfully, the healing in the gospel reminds us we don't need this push and pull, scapegoating others or blaming ourselves. The man is us, wearing blinders regarding the contradictions we see in life. We prefer to divide the world into friends and enemies, unaware the one we demonize is a projection of our inner fears. And so I go along assuming I'm say, upset by what my dad said last week, when I'm really angry at something he did when I was small. At a deeper level I'm angry at G-d over my mom's death, which in the end is my turmoil over how powerless I felt. But all of that is hard to look at so I put it all on something my dad said last week. The Genesis myth is at play here. After we ate from the proverbial "tree of knowledge of good and evil", there arose a pattern of division, blame, scapegoating, conflict. Healing the man with paste made from earth and water, Jesus brings us back before that moment, to when G-d made the first human, when we were vulnerable, naked, but without shame. We had unity with G-d and each other. In other words, we shared acceptance of life's complexity, its joys and heartaches, none of which we can control, including a virus. It invites us into compassionate solidarity in the face of self-isolation and everything else unfolding as a result. Jesus is "light of the world". He shows us the wisdom of accepting the pain as well as joy that comes with living. He loves generously through it and invites us to do the same.

And people are doing just this, "caremongering" even as they struggle with their own burdens, rather than scaremongering and scapegoating as a way to push their struggles away. We see this happening in creative ways, albeit from a distance. Like people in Italy singing from balconies so no one feels alone, or in Vancouver where they cheer and clap each evening in gratitude to front line workers. Or when a call went out from the Food banks of York Region for support and the next day someone drove up with a truck-full of food. Likewise, grassroots groups are popping up all over Canada and around the globe, people offering to get groceries or meds. The self-isolation orders barely started here in Ontario and I had emails from people volunteering to help. Doug has been working hard to get an organized plan in place, not just for the congregation but the wider community. This is the kind of pulling together that is possible, and so needed. There were lots of people on an economic edge before we started "sheltering in place". As money gets tight, there will be an increasing number in need of compassion, support and care.

Without a doubt this is an unprecedented experience we're facing globally. We can wish it away, blame others, divide into camps as social distancing turns to something much more troubling. Or we can pull together in solidarity, helping one another, viewing all we do and experience through the lens of compassion and love. These are challenging times, the way ahead unclear. But as Og Mandino reminds us, we can love the darkness. We need the dark in order to see the stars. Amen.