



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Waiting on the Beach” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

April 26, 2020; Third Sunday of Easter

Reading: John 21:1-14; Quote from Michael Collins, Gemini 10 and Apollo 11 astronaut

On Friday I watched the virtual memorial for the victims of the shootings in Nova Scotia. Many of the sentiments were expected. Some speakers were eloquent, others less so, all were heartfelt. There was one speaker, a pastor, who named something unexpected yet poignant. He shared how on Sunday everyone felt shock. On Monday everyone felt sorrow. But by Tuesday he felt shame someone was capable of such hatred and violence. Among the speakers, singers and a surprising number of sportscasters, his words seemed to capture the heart of what many of us feel.

Now there are a couple of things we can do with that feeling. One is to run from it. That is what we see in the opening lines of our gospel reading as Peter says to his friends, “I’m going fishing.” At first Peter’s actions seem odd, following last Sunday’s reading when the Risen Jesus appeared to them. We forget that what we just heard is likely from an addendum. If that’s the case prior to this is Peter and John feeling confused as they leave the empty tomb. His reaction in today’s text is more understandable. After all he not only witnessed the result of hatred and violence in Jesus crucified, but fearing how it may impact him, he denied knowing Jesus. Overwhelmed by all that happened, he returned home wanting to put it behind him. But he can’t, any more than we could.

No wonder he and his friends fish all night with nothing to show for it. But as morning breaks Jesus is on the beach with breakfast. This is the alternative to running from the shame. You face it. We’ll hear more about this next Sunday as Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. But before he can get there, he needs support, to share a meal with friends, know their love without judgement, know they are there with an ear or a warm hand on the shoulder. We can’t give this kind of support right now but we adapt with virtual vigils and lit candles on social media. Be it in the flesh or virtually, all we can offer in these moments is our vulnerability, our shared feelings of powerlessness in the face of trauma and tragedy, hands open in resignation as much as to help.

We feel resigned and yet also want answers. No wonder many of us have been glued to the news for whatever information there is. We question how something like this can happen. We want to blame someone, including God. We wonder how God could allow such hatred and violence. The question presumes God is almighty, all powerful, in control. But in Jesus we see the opposite. He is born a defenceless child, and a poor one at that. Throughout his life and ministry he taught that the reign of God is about service, being last, letting go for others. In his death and resurrection, we discover that the nature of God was never about success, control, might, but vulnerable love. God releases power to give free will, even if it means it will be abused. Love freely offered never exerts power over

others, only expresses power with another. While it seems God is absent in the violence last weekend, or the pandemic, because God isn't forcefully intervening, I'd argue God is present in the heartbreak, in compassionate service, always there, respecting our freedom.

This is difficult for us because what we experience in God's seeming absence doesn't feel like power. We expect power to be force. This is likely why the gunman acted as he did. He wore a uniform and drove a cruiser not just to allude capture. His obsession with the police says a lot about needing authority, to be in control of others, especially women, the start of the violence likely a case of domestic assault. We claim zero tolerance for violence against women yet here we are. We can't ignore this aspect of the case, yet as a Toronto Star columnist recently noted the coverage is falling into typical patterns where we try to understand the perpetrator's mental state. She argues that if he was a person of colour he'd have been flagged a long time ago. Culturally we give way to power, especially the power of some, like the gunman, even as he craved more.

As I consider this, I echo the pastor's feeling of shame. There is clearly something amiss in our world and in our hearts, something that has been highlighted by the pandemic. A constant mantra is that we're in this together but as I shared last week, we're not experiencing it equally. We are seeing social and economic gaps, especially south of the border. We have heard of various states reopening their economies, and some provinces too. What we don't hear is how the push in some areas may be to cut off access to unemployment insurance, forcing those already at higher risk of serious illness being exposed to the virus. I'm not sure it's a coincidence that jobs held mostly by suburban white men aren't designated as essential, but jobs filled mainly by racialized people and women in urban areas are. And before we get too smug, we may not want to reopen the economy as quickly here in Canada, but we have similarly high numbers of women and people of colour working in frontline jobs for low pay, and feeling more precarious as the shut-down continues. The disparity between haves and have-nots is growing here and it's making all of us sick, even the wealthy. This is likely caused by the stress we feel from the severing of community bonds, from a lack of social cohesion. I wonder if we applaud all the ways we are helping each other right now because so much community solidarity has been eroded over the last several decades. Maybe this is where God is present right now, helping us to see how much our society has been shaped by coercive power, by who has it and who doesn't, and reminding us that it doesn't have to be this way, that there is an alternative.

When Jesus stood on the beach, he told his friends to cast the net on the other side, inviting them to reclaim the vision he first offered, one echoed by astronauts in high orbit. This world really is shared by all of us. If that's the case we need to reshape how we treat each other. As we sit with each other in this time of grief, I pray we will listen to what is on our hearts, helping each other name the shame of a world too beholden to power. May we start shaping a world less about force and more open to vulnerability, less needing to control and more about loving service. This is the vision Jesus was waiting on the beach to offer his friends. He's waiting on the beach for us as well. Amen.