



Richmond Hill Reflections

“A Family of Heartbeats” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 10, 2020; Fifth Sunday of Easter (Mother’s Day)

Reading: Acts 2:37-47; “Naming the Heartbeats” by Aimee Nehzhukumatathil

Naming the heartbeats. There is something about the image in Aimee Nehzhukumatathil’s poem that feels so appropriate on this day that we honour mothers. There’s something very maternal in it to me, and I’m not just thinking of biological or adoptive mothers. I mean a way of being that reaches out and holds everyone in love, has compassion for someone sick next door and on the other side of the world. Now I’m probably just feeling sentimental on this Mother’s Day and so am placing a burden of love, and an overly gendered one at that, on the many mothers I know. But as I remember my mom, think of my sister, recall the mothers of friends over the years, the many moms I’ve got to know in my ministry, there’s something about mothering captured not just in Aimee’s naming her children and groups of animals, but in her desire to name the “shadows of moons we don’t yet know” and acknowledge the “river we’ve only visited in our dreams.” Her heart beats in synch with those she names and needs to name. That desire to hold everything in love is mothering to me.

It’s how I experience the One we call God. Which makes me wonder if the disciples misheard Jesus when he taught them how to pray. Maybe he told them to pray “Our mother in heaven” but someone changed it? After all, in those first years they took what they owned and sold it so they could share the proceeds. As three thousand became part of their community, their instinct was to find a way to come together as families do. Why? Because of everything they knew and loved about Jesus.

Beatrice Bruteau names it as she writes: “Jesus had a fundamental vision... that all people are ‘children of God.’ This is the theological perspective of his ‘program,’ on which everything else rests. I am supposing that he took this seriously, more or less literally,... teaching that each person has an uncreated soul that is actually a continuation of the Divine Life itself. When he met a person, ... he really believed that God was somehow present in that person, so he looked for that presence through all the overlying contradictions to it.” And so, he formed a community without masters or servants. He removed any cultural, sexual, social or historical barriers to membership, everyone part of the family. Paul names this in his letter to the Galatians: in Christ there’s no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. All are one. As we hear in the Acts reading, the disciples put this into practice.

At least tried to. It took a vision for Peter to welcome Gentiles into the family and even then he wasn’t consistent. Paul confronted Peter when he stopped eating with both Jewish and Gentile believers. When he told the crowd to “repent”, to change their hearts, Peter was speaking to himself as well. And all of us, given how easily we put barriers back up. The church soon backtracked on women in leadership. Some of Paul’s letters accommodated slavery. Latched onto by colonisers, no one cared they likely weren’t written by Paul, just that they were biblical. How else does another passage, an obscure story about Noah cursing his grandson Canaan get used to justify enslaving

African peoples? Even now we see how ingrained these racist attitudes are. Ahmaud Arbery was just out jogging. But the perception that all black men are a threat led a white father and son to hunt him down and kill him. We're only hearing about his murder two months later because a video surfaced. Local police didn't press charges. One issue I note in this is how predominantly black communities are still policed mainly by white officers. That perpetuates injustice. Imbalance in the racial makeup of police is an issue here as well. As I suggested a couple of weeks ago, similar racial dynamics are at play in the push to fully reopen the economy. Underlying health conditions are exacerbated by poverty, which disproportionately impacts communities of colour. What especially weighs on my heart is how some of the states reopening fastest were historically slave states. That brings me pause.

Especially since it's a false choice between health and the economy. I read an article from a therapist who contracted COVID-19. Following his recovery, he could no longer work the hours he once did, and that didn't even factor in the psychological toll he was experiencing. That's one example. And what of the impact of people dying, many of working age, not to mention their grieving families? No one talks about the economic impact of significantly more people contracting the virus. So many speak of their rights and freedoms as if they're all that matter. Seventy-five years ago, it was VE Day. Victory was not in the cards without everyone working together. They had no idea how long the war would last, or if they'd be successful. I wonder how veterans feel about the push to reopen more quickly. We are in an extended fight like they were. I pray that we are made of the same stuff as well.

Surprisingly, some church leaders are among those pushing to reopen the economy. I would like to see you all as much as anyone but not at the risk of people's health. Being church is much more than the economics of bums in pews. Thankfully, in a recent webinar I heard the opposite of the push to reopen. One of the presenters posited not reopening churches until there's a vaccine, asking how we can claim to be church if there are groups of people, those of us who are frail, immunocompromised, have underlying health conditions, who can't attend. That made sense to me, even if it is fiscally risky. In a family we protect everyone, don't sacrifice some to benefit others. Jesus made it clear no one is expendable. How can they be if each person is a continuation of Divine Life?

Because we live in a world that forgets this fundamental truth, that we are all heartbeats of one heart, I believe we are called as a faith community to live out what it means, to be an example as we share what we have and look out for one another, to show that being family is more than blood. I am so grateful we are seeing this alternative narrative all around us and not just as church. It tells me that a different kind of world is possible even as some push to "get back to normal".

In the webinar I was reminded that in worship we rehearse who we're called to be in the world, even in virtual worship. So, I ask you to indulge me. I invite you to hold hands in your mind and in your heart. If someone is at home with you hold their physical hand, but also reach out to those here with you in this virtual space. Feel the energy that flows between us. Feel the love that holds us together. As well, feel the love that extends out beyond our virtual circle and embraces all the other circles of worship, all the circles of families and cities and nations and species and worlds. Name each other's heartbeats. Name every heartbeat. We are all children of our mothering God. This is the vision of Jesus. May we live into this vision as we weather this time and well beyond. May it be so. Amen.