



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Struggling for a New Vision” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 17, 2020; Sixth Sunday of Easter

Reading: Acts 6:8-14; 7:54b-60; “Special Plates” by Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

I’m a bit of an English-Lit nerd. So, as it grew unseasonably cold earlier this week, I wondered if I was experiencing some kind of “pathetic fallacy”, that is when the weather in a play or a poem matches the mood of the story. After all I had been meditating on the story of Stephen. The contrast between it and the feel-good narrative from last week was profound. Last week, we heard how the followers of Jesus grew in number and found a way to treat each other like family as he had taught them. But then this week, we hear how Stephen, a deacon known for his holiness and love was stoned to death. Though it is cast as a story of Christianity’s first martyr, it is a chilling story.

Now as a whole, United Church folks are a feel-good narrative people, and so in the early days of the lockdown, well quite a few poems and reflections landed in my email inbox. Many of you have seen at least one or two, because we’ve included some in RHUC Reflections. They’re the ones about how the earth is breathing again or how people are helping each other. They bring me peace in the midst of the struggle we’re in, like there’s a hoped-for-world that can be born from this health crisis. In a way they’re really quite biblical. In the prophetic tradition they don’t just name unjust patterns but offer a view of a new world, one in which, if we echo Rumi, we see God’s light shining in another’s eyes. It’s the light of love holding us together, even those who hurt us. It is the same light that Stephen saw in his final moments, enabling him to transcend fear and anger and offer forgiveness as he died. It is what transforms the pain of the cross into the renewing promise of Easter.

This gives me hope. I need hope because I’m experiencing a chill as our new normal enters its tenth week and I watch news about an uptick in anti-Chinese racism, even by celebrities, or I read about the growing risk of famine in parts of the Global South even as food here is thrown away here in North America. I despair that Rumi’s vision of light, of a holy unity within our diversity, will always be beyond us. Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia which adds another layer, a reminder that while we’ve made leaps toward inclusion here in Canada, there are many places where being yourself is a death sentence. And if we are honest, there is still prejudice here, even violence, especially if you’re trans.

This brings me back to Acts and I wonder why there was such a violent reaction. The answer is in Stephen’s sermon. We skipped over it because it is pretty long, but he connects the story of Exodus with Jesus. Admittedly, as he tells the story he also blames them for his death, so for that their anger is understandable. But I’m also struck how Exodus is about liberation, yet the ex-slaves, at first creating an equitable society, replaced it with monarchy. Stephen points to a foreshadowing of this in

Exodus, referring to how they made an idol, thus emulating their enslavers' religion. We see this repeated in Acts. Their anger was roused by the accusation Stephen spoke against the Temple and pushed for changes to customs. I see the same happening now. Those who are clamouring to end the lockdown say that we need to get back to normal. Normal is a long way off, and even then, the disruption we are facing is reshaping what normal is. They want to get back to normal just the same.

As a whole people can be very resistant to change, fearful even, holding on to "how we do things" even when it doesn't benefit most of us, especially if we think globally. Historically, crises like what we're facing bring change. Scholars argue that the Black Death that ravaged Europe over five years in the 14th century reshaped Medieval society, undercutting church power and unravelling feudalism. But it took the peasant revolts in the next century to put an end to serfdom, and then the push of the Reformation a century past that for religious change to take hold. Closer to our time, the Great Depression brought economic and social reform through the New Deal, but it took three years of Hoover's unsuccessful, though tried and true, policies for the US electorate to give Roosevelt's plan a try. Even then FDR was strongly opposed by conservative politicians and business leaders alike.

So why is this? This will sound cheeky but we've become habituated to the curve. Now I don't mean the curve of infection, but the graphic itself, a peak. Five thousand years ago we began to shift from fairly flat forms of governance and economics to our status quo of hierarchical inequality. Ironically, our overall survival is better in more equitable societies. But by one theory, hierarchical forms came to dominate because unequal access to resources create instability and conflict. To deal with this, a society pushes into new territories. Our history of the rise of one empire after another shows that, but the consequence is our normal, and unsustainable, situation for humans as well as the environment. As the pandemic has revealed, for many a return to normal will be a return to struggle, not out of it.

We need to shift from the status quo and despite the feelings of despair that grab hold of me, I believe we are. It may feel like we're stuck, even at times going backwards, but when we look across generations, we see how we've been slowly flattening the religious, political, and economic curve. We're getting there but I don't think we're doing it on our own. I believe Spirit is at work, pushing through our fear, bringing the renewal we need each time the chill of prejudice, power and patriarchy takes hold. One way I see this right now is the shift in who we say is essential. We're speaking about the importance of janitors, long-term care aides, grocery clerks, cashiers, early childhood educators, bus drivers, truckers, the many people that for too long we've overlooked, and underpaid. That to me is as significant a move to flattening the curve of our hierarchical society as the supports for working families that came out of the Great Depression or the rise in wages following the plague.

Each crisis carries the promise of a more equitable, sustainable, loving world. This is the vision Jesus pointed us toward, emulated by Stephen, realized every time we denounce racism, given expression as gay and trans youth express themselves without fear, embodied as we pitch in and help each other, incarnated as the earth gets to breath. We may struggle but in Spirit's care we'll get there, as surely as streams flow into the ocean, and Winter's chill gives way to Spring. Amen.