



Richmond Hill Reflections

“No longer other” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 24, 2020; Seventh Sunday of Easter

Reading: Acts 17:22-33; A saying of Changsa Jingcen, 8th Century Zen Buddhist Master

Over the last two weeks, we’ve explored stories from the Acts of the Apostles. We mostly hear these readings at this time of year, which makes sense, as this is when we focus on resurrection and how we share in it through baptism. Acts is a reflection on this too. The apostles, changed by the events of Easter, travel from Jerusalem to Rome, sharing the gospel and baptising new disciples as they go. We tend to consider Easter through an individualist lens, but the resurrection shapes whole communities.

So you may ask, “what do I mean by that?” We see baptism in terms of personal spirituality, but the apostles looked at its significance in more social terms. If you recall what I shared on Mother’s Day, the first thing they did in this regard was assume the faith community is a family. At first who this included was limited. Last Sunday’s story about Stephen focused on the end of his ministry but it began with a conflict between Christians who spoke Aramaic and those who spoke Greek. This is before Gentiles were baptised so these are all Jewish Christians. Common faith didn’t erase cultural tension. Stephen was one of seven appointed to make sure the needs of both groups were met. But as the story unfolds, the circle of who can be included as family keeps widening, so that eventually Samaritans and finally Gentiles are welcomed.

This is possible because of a fundamental attitude we hear in Paul’s speech in Athens. He’d clearly been attentive as he wandered around. He speaks about their “Altar to an Unknown God” and quotes their poet Aratus when he says “In God, we live and move and exist.” Modelling Paul’s respect and openness is critical to living Jesus’ vision and take seriously that all of us are God’s children. In a sense it’s something Canada has been trying to practice since the 70s when multiculturalism became official policy. It hasn’t worked as well as we’d like, but not for the reasons some commenters posit. We don’t need to insist newcomers assimilate. Immigrants know that to succeed they need to learn how Canadians do things. The shift is needed in those of us who settled here generations ago.

It starts with understanding that culture is more than how you dress or prepare food. Culture is about how you see the world. Language is critical to this. No translation from one language into another ever fully captures the meaning of the original. The fact so many languages, especially Indigenous languages, are dying out is tragic. The worldviews they carry will be lost and humanity impoverished by that. Ultimately, culture is about how you make decisions and exercise leadership. It’s about land management and social management too. It’s about family structure and gender relationships, the way you educate, understand the meaning of work, seek justice, facilitate healing, view time. It’s the historical events you celebrate and how you do so. It is how you pray and how you understand the

one you pray to. Every culture is a gift of insight and we are enriched when we take on Paul's posture of openness and respect. I know for myself my understanding of the world deepened through my living in an Oji-Cree community. I was only there five years but forever changed by it.

Respect doesn't mean lack of critique. Every culture bears scrutiny and we don't need to look far. We're quick to judge some cultures regarding women's rights, even blame a religion, but we have a long way to go before there's gender parity in Canada. The same goes for racial equality. We may not have a federal leader suggesting Henry Ford succeeded because of his bloodline, but I have heard too many "go back to where you came from" videos, not to mention a political leadership candidate again questioning the loyalty of our top doc, to make me think we're immune from racial and cultural bigotry. And how I wish we'd been open to Indigenous views on land. Our ecological crisis in large part emerges out of Euro-American views on resource development and a push for economic growth.

In the end, a key to critique is knowing what lens to use. For much of Christian history, well both missionaries and settlers used a colonialist lens, imposing their ways on others, even to become Christian. We sadly forgot we'd originally set that biased view aside in the first years as a Christian community. At a meeting in Jerusalem (it's referred to a couple of chapters before today's text) the apostles decided new Christians didn't need to become Jewish first. Through Spirit they came to understand that every culture has its own genius. Anyone could be in the family, as long as they followed some fundamentals, which at their core were practicing what it means to love God, and to love one's neighbour. I think a good way to love to God and neighbour is to see the wisdom of each culture, emerging as it does from a unique context, environment and history. Two groups, in the face of similar circumstances, will come up with different solutions. What a gift, especially since an outlook that made sense at one point may become harmful (I'm thinking of the environment here). The approach of another culture may offer needed correction. And that doesn't even factor in how every culture evolves, especially as different cultures meet and we learn from each other.

With all of this in mind, the United Church of Canada committed to become an intercultural church. I say become not be, because we well know that it is a work in progress. Becoming an intercultural church presumes an awareness of one's culture, something we're more conscious of when meeting someone of a different view. The approach of Jesus, modelled by Paul, is to listen with curiosity, especially if your culture is dominant. How do we put this into practice? We affirm rather than discount differences, are open to multiple languages, seek diverse cultural views when naming people to decision-making roles, foster an environment where difficult conversations can happen, encourage healthy critique of each other's views. Addressing power imbalance isn't about colonial guilt. It's living the gospel, and like the apostles, putting what baptism means into practice. Given the state of the world, we need to model what family looks like, with love and committed to justice.

As we continue to ponder what it means to share in the resurrection, may we do so as a community. As Changsa so beautifully expressed it, "in the entire universe, there is no one who is not your own self." This is what it means to be God's children as Jesus taught, or to echo Aratus, to understand that

“in God we live, and move and exist.” If we believe we are one, everything connected, that no one is anymore an other to us, then we must model what loving God and loving neighbour looks like, to be one family in a spirit of openness, encouragement, and respect. Amen.