



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Out into the Street”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 31, 2020; Pentecost Sunday

Reading: Acts 2:1-21; Excerpt from Chapter 3, Book II of *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo

Here we are again. Another major day in the Christian calendar and we’re still online. When we shut down the building 80 days ago, I imagined we’d be back for Easter. I know... Now worship on Zoom feels routine, if not normal. In a way it’s like just before what happens in the scripture reading this morning. As yet no wind, no tongues of flame, no uncanny ability to communicate, in the upper room in self isolation as told to by Jesus. We’re at prayer, waiting, not entirely sure what’s next.

At least we had been. Recently I’ve heard the wind pick up, and the last few days, well, it’s been blowing a gale. As I shared before, at the start of the emergency we needed to pull together and respond to pastoral needs, especially of senior members who also fall within a vulnerable sector regarding the virus. Listening to stories about the resurrection was comforting as we reflected how Jesus was with us in our confusion and grief. But just as there came a point when the disciples, adjusted to their new normal, went into the street to be church, we can do the same.

And we need to. Around the time we shifted from John’s resurrection accounts to stories in Acts about the disciples discerning how to be church, there was a shift in the real world too. We went from following protocols and cheering on healthcare workers, to a growing push to reopen and an unravelling of community spirit. It feels like with each passing day the shift has picked up pace. Frustration erupted in angry, even violent, outbursts toward racialized peoples. We want to claim it is out of character, point to what is happening in the US, but we struggle with racism this side of the border. Yes, George Floyd was killed by a police officer. But did you read about Leonard Rodriguez, sent home with antibiotics even though he had COVID-19, and died two days later? The racism in the first death was overt, subtler in the second. Both deaths entirely unnecessary and preventable.

While the pandemic has rightly been the focus of our attention, these two deaths remind us that issues of racism, poverty, ageism, gender inequality didn’t miraculously go away. In fact the pandemic laid bare just how endemic they are, even here. As we celebrate Pentecost, I’m left to wonder if we misinterpreted what happened. Europeans acted like the gift to comprehend what was said worked in one direction, as if the listener’s ability to understand the speaker’s words gave license for one group to impose its language, social values, religious traditions on another, an assumption rooted in notions of supremacy and privilege. That black men and women keep dying on both sides of the border reveals how true this is. Folks are understandably protesting.

As citizens in Minneapolis and other cities take to the streets, I know many of you, like me, are asking what to do when public health tells us to stay home. Since the pandemic first started, I've been taking part in webinars about the church's future post COVID-19, the most recent exploring how we work for social justice when we can't go protest or in our context host a monthly lunch for folks with mental health and other issues. A presenter reminded us that staying put doesn't mean being inactive. The Spirit is calling us out into the street in other ways, and as she does so, I wonder if she's reversing the gift and giving the ability to hear different languages.

I say that because listening is a way many of us can "go out into the street" right now, a big part of justice work being education. And so we can expand reading lists to include more authors of colour, women, Indigenous writers and LGBTQ+ writers, listen to podcasts that stretch our thinking, look at firsthand testimonies, dig deeper into underlying issues. This is tough work. Triggering for those bearing the brunt of oppression, and for those who are privileged, me included, means facing hard truths about the present and not just the past, about who continues to be held back so a privileged few can get ahead. Being an advocate means knowing who you are and how your experience is shaped by the world as it is. Only when we have done that can we reach for the world that can be, and like Bishop Myriel, recognize everyone, especially those needing refuge, as a brother, a sister, a sibling.

Part of that story is how Bishop Myriel used his position, and privilege, to bring about change, and the same is true of many of us. As I have been sharing, ultimately the Spirit is calling us to break through divisions and to foster relationships. And that includes relationships with people who have power. We may be at home but each of us can take time to get better acquainted with community leaders, political leaders, religious leaders, all without an agenda. The friendships we nurture now become the network of advocates we need in the future. And speaking of friends, we shouldn't discount the power of social media. It is a powerful tool that we can use in service of justice. After all you never know who may see a post, and what may happen as it is forwarded

Whether we're "in the street" by clicking a mouse, or for some by donning a mask to go protest, the work the Spirit is calling us to is walking with others as equals no matter their circumstances. This isn't as easy as it may sound. Many of us, me included, have vested interests in the world as it is, even as I yearn for something new. And so I really believe we need Spirit to do her work, changing hearts, starting with my own. Thankfully, we have ways to invite her in, including being at the table virtually, where we are fed and given the strength we need for the journey ahead.

Friends, this is an interesting time we're in but one which holds possibility if we're willing to move beyond walls, real and virtual, and take time to engage and to learn. Just as Spirit called the disciples to the street to break through long held divisions, she's doing so again, calling us to speak, but more importantly inviting us to listen. Amen.