



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Reclaiming Stonewall” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

June 14, 2020; Pride Sunday *Second Sunday after Pentecost)

Reading: 1 John 4:11-21; Psalm 139; “Litany for Survival” by Audre Lorde

Pride is one of my favourite times of the year. It’s when I let my hair down (if I had any). In my day to day I’m fairly open, but can still feel a bit guarded. During Pride though, I’m freer, more camp, can literally wear pride on my sleeve, or around my neck. It’s a time to live out the words of Ps. 139, to celebrate that I’m wonderfully made; to take to heart that the one we call God knows the yearnings of my heart and loves me as I am, that in fact wherever I run, God is there, a holy presence of love, of life, of grace, with me, within me, in all I do, in all I am, and in who I love. That is Pride for me.

And yet while I say that with confidence now, it wasn’t always the case. I grew up being told that how I felt is wrong. For a long time, that’s what I wore on my sleeve rather than what I just shared, even though I was out. Why? I came out in the 1980’s in the middle of the AIDS crisis. AIDS was dubbed by media as the “gay plague” and by preachers as “God’s wrath”. As a consequence, Reagan refused to fund research, effectively consigning anyone with HIV to a death sentence. Knowing you are considered expendable can make you punchy, at least it did for me. It ended up making me even more conscious of my sexuality in relation to other parts of my life. And that gave me some blinders.

Case in point, when I first read Audre Lorde’s “Litany for Survival” I felt her words in my heart, especially regarding finding love in doorways, “coming and going in the hours between dawns”. I recognized the secrecy. But she also wrote of learning to be afraid with her mother’s milk. And though I resonate with the fear that love will vanish, or never return, even the sentiment that “we were never meant to survive”, I know those words aren’t meant for me. Audre Lorde was lesbian, but more fundamentally she was black. Yet I did what so many white people do. I made it about me.

As difficult as it is to admit, that is what the protests regarding the death of George Floyd are all about, the impact of the constant centring of white lives, white feelings, white privilege. It needs to stop if we’re going to have a just and truly equitable world. This is something 2SLGBTQ+ folks should feel in our bones. After all this is the fiftieth anniversary of the first Pride march. It was a commemoration of the Stonewall Uprising the year before, six nights of protests that have a good deal in common with right now. No matter what some say about the riots being about the death of Judy Garland, the real issue was police harassment and brutality. It was illegal then to even meet other gay men or lesbians, let alone be intimate with your own sex. It was against the law to dress “unnaturally” too. Physical harassment of 2SLGBTQ+ people was common and the police who regularly raided gay bars were often violent. On June 28, 1969, enough was enough.

Now that I have shared a bit of the history, I hope you noted I said “should” in terms of 2SLGBTQ+ folks standing with Black and other racialized people in this critical time. Those of us who are white

and gay, especially if we add male, can forget it wasn't white patrons, especially straight acting ones, who first fought back. The catalyst for the riot was likely the repeated escape from custody of Stormé Delaverie, a biracial, butch lesbian bouncer. Most eyewitnesses also placed Martha Johnson, a black drag queen in the centre of the fracas. She denied being there at the start of the riot on the first night, but her dropping a bag of bricks through the windshield of a cruiser on the second night helped to galvanize the crowd. It was mostly drag queens and butch lesbians, transgender and non-binary patrons, hustlers and street kids, many of whom were people of colour, who sparked the movement for sexual minority and gender identity rights in North America and around the world. That part of the story is too easily forgotten and we can't, because erasing Black and other racialized people from history, including queer history, is one of the ways systemic racism is perpetuated.

As a person of faith, that truth makes the reading from 1 John incredibly important. How can I claim to love God if I don't love my siblings? I don't, not really, as long as I stay silent regarding a system that bullies and kills them. Which brings me back to being focused on my sexuality. Yes, I'm gay. But I need to acknowledge as well that as a white, male, cisgender, university educated, able-bodied, middle-aged, neurotypical, English-speaking, settler, non-Jewish, non-Muslim leader in a culturally dominant religious institution, I carry a bucket load of privilege and power. Which means I need to be accountable for all of the ways that I benefit from a racist system, and I need to do whatever I can to dismantle it. If I love my siblings, I must do as much.

Ultimately, Pride is about just that - loving our siblings as well as truly loving ourselves. And if we love them, we'll do two things. First, each one of us has some aspect of our lives, it may be one, or there may be many, where we experience marginalisation. That enables us, even if just a little, to draw on empathy and stand with whoever bears the brunt of injustice. But we need more than just empathy. Each of us has aspects of our lives, maybe one or many, where we're privileged, and can use that to push for change. For some, that part is scary. Not because it means calling out police, politicians, neighbours, family, intimidating as that is. Deeper is confronting the need to hold on to power. That held me back when I was a priest, back in the closet for 12 years. The longer I was in Catholic ministry, the more afraid of leaving I became, afraid to lose privilege, status, reputation. In the end I let that go because someone was waiting for me, and this is true now. We stand with each other. That's powerful. And there's another presence. The same God who loves me as I am, is in each of us, connecting all of us. As John writes, perfect love, namely the one who loves us, casts out fear.

As I said, Pride is one of my favourite times of the year, and though this year can't be the usual celebration, I still relish it. In fact, I wonder if this year is better. The lockdown pushed many into a reflective, more open-hearted space, so as pain and anger erupted over the death of George Floyd, it was not just felt across so-called racial lines but people have been moved to act. This feels apt on this fiftieth anniversary of the first Pride March. We've been brought back to its roots - a struggle for liberation for all people, not just straight white men, but every race, gender, orientation, identity and culture, every age, ability, creed, status and circumstance, every one of us, standing side by side with empathy, respect and love, ready to change the world. May it be so this Pride and always. Amen.