



Richmond Hill Reflections

“True Hospitality” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

June 28, 2020 (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Reading: Matthew 10:34-42; Excerpt from “What Are We Willing to Sacrifice for Justice?”
by Janis Rosheuvél and Rev. Dionne P. Boissière (www.unitedmethodistwomen.org)

When we worked on our Mission Action Plan, we named values that we uphold at RHUC. No surprise we highlighted reaching out in love and pursuing justice. It’s a big part of our identity. We also stressed our ongoing desire to be inclusive. We even made to “radically create a sense of belonging” one of three guiding principles. The challenge of a document like our MAP that has multiple intentions and projects is we can get lost in the parts and forget how they are connected. The same happens when reading the bible. Just as we need to consider our MAP as a whole, we need to see the bible’s overarching narrative, to read passages in context, try to make sense of them, even when they seem not to go together. Like today. Jesus warns the Twelve that discipleship will mean choosing God’s reign over family, accepting conflict, even that faithfulness may lead to the cross. Those are high levels of commitment. But then he speaks about being rewarded for just offering a cup of water. How can that and the cross both be integral to following Jesus?

Then I heard about the recent deaths of three migrant farm workers and realized offering water is a way to live God’s reign, showing hospitality is doing justice. From the start of the pandemic, activists warned that given the living and working conditions faced by many migrant workers, if someone got sick the virus would spread quickly. During an e-rally I attended, Syed Hussan from Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, shared how lack of permanent status for migrant workers is part of the problem. Work permits are tied to single employers, making it difficult to report health and safety issues. There’s a constant fear of job loss, homelessness, deportation. Now most farms are good but there are bad players. Concerns have been raised for years, but as a nation we’ve looked away. Focused on food mainly grown for export, we’ve left workers feeling second class, that they’re not really welcome. As the virus spread and hundreds became ill, instead of expressions of concern, migrant workers have received accusations of intentionally placing Canadians at risk, despite the likelihood local workers brought the virus to the farm. Inhospitability equals injustice.

I see a similar connection regarding anti-Black racism. I hope you saw a url link in my message in RHUC Reflections and watched the video by the Black Clergy Network. One comment really hit me: “I didn’t know I was Black until I came to this country, Canada, a country I thought was welcoming, a country of acceptance.” Imagine how that felt, to move to a country so proud of its official policy of multiculturalism and feel othered, made aware of being Black because of how being White is so centred. This is sometimes expressed overtly, more often in microaggressions, like when statements are made which underscore that someone doesn’t belong. Consider how some of these statements are

experienced when the speaker is White and the recipient a Person of Colour. “You speak so well.” The inference is surprise, an assumption that a racialized person would be less articulate. Or “Your name is so hard to pronounce.” It suggests they don’t fit in linguistically and learning about their cultural identity isn’t important. Or “Where do you really come from?” It suggests that European descendants have a greater right to be here, a belief contingent on the erasure of Indigenous identity. Each statement signals that the hearer isn’t really welcome, and the last ignores a multi-millennia connection by Indigenous peoples to the land that’s now known as Canada. You see the injustice.

You also can see that the belief they’re based on is untrue, yet the urban landscape reinforces the idea that some people, white people, have a greater claim to be here than others. This is one of the reasons there is a growing call to take down statues, change the names of buildings, streets, even provinces. Claims that this will lead to an erasure of history forget that history is dynamic. What happened in the past doesn’t change, but how we commemorate it can. It’s too easily overlooked that naming of places was intentional, the over-layering of colonial identity onto someone else’s homeland. We may have forgotten the role Henry Dundas played in the delay of the abolition of slavery, but it wasn’t lost on those who first saw his name on a Toronto street. Whether a statue or a provincial name, memorials are propaganda, and keep the colonizing narrative at the heart of Canada's identity. Some worry about a changed landscape of new names or monuments. Imagine how you would have felt as Mississauga or Seneca as settlers imposed a new landscape on your home, gave new names to places close to your soul. We need to hold that in our hearts as we reevaluate who we memorialize and what values to uphold. As a community’s values change, our public spaces need to change as well.

As much as this all needs to take place in the public sphere, it has to happen in church too. How can it not if we take both justice and inclusion as seriously as our MAP suggests? The protests of this past month invite some personal soul searching, but Spirit is calling us to go deeper, to look at who we are corporately. It’s why we’re implementing an anti-racism task group: to look at our practices, examine who’s in positions of leadership, take to heart the experiences of racialized members of RHUC, make whatever changes needed, be it in governance, worship, programming, to ensure we’re a community where anyone in an increasingly diverse neighbourhood belongs. When we’re a truly welcoming community, we’re closer to being a just community as well.

Within all this, some ask, “Where does it end?” The answer is never. We keep pushing toward justice, a justice rooted in deep belonging. The asker wants an end point because they feel like their sense of belonging is threatened. But as the United Methodist Women wrote, if we’re going to live in a more equitable society, we need to make sacrifices. How can we do otherwise? Jesus was willing to die so the world he lived in, that we live in, was more just. Shouldn’t his followers at least be willing to see statues removed, be more conscious of how they speak, consider how they lead, pay more for food, ensure workers are treated justly, stand between a protester and the police? Love costs, but is it love if it doesn’t? Jesus was clear – hospitality is part of a wider call to justice. May we then work for a world, a community, a church where all truly belong. Amen.