



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Child’s Play” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

July 5, 2020, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Matthew 11:25-30; Excerpt from *Meditations of the Heart* by Howard W. Thurman

Child's play. We say it when we mean something is easy. And yet I wonder if the things we just saw children doing are really all that easy as adults. To cry out “Mr. Tree” and so give the tree its own identity, even personhood. To freely keep feeding birds, immersed in the joy of the moment. To greet a friend with such unconscious abandon, especially given the so-called racial difference between them. Each of these seems more challenging as we get older. The last part of the video captures a dynamic of adulthood, at least in this culture, in how sharing is something we at times can struggle to do. At least Malachi learned how to share, especially when told Celeste is hungry.

It’s no wonder then Jesus prays as he does, thanking God for withholding the secrets of heaven from the so-called wise and intelligent and bestowing them on infants. Jesus saw true wisdom in children - a wondering openness to the world, a contagious curiosity and naïve ability to be fast friends with whoever else is in the room, no barriers or prejudices yet. Adults sometimes cite the struggle with sharing as proof that it doesn’t really come naturally to us, and yet those who claim that forget that what we saw with Malachi is about development. He’s still developing a separate sense of self and sees everything as his. But as little ones grow in awareness they’ll learn how to share, and in fact, we teach it because for most of our time as a species on this planet, we have needed the support of the community to survive, and sharing is a big part of being in community.

Alas, that lesson is increasingly lost. That is the only explanation I have for the video of a white couple in St. Louis, standing outside of their home in an exclusive neighbourhood, the man with a rifle in his hands as a group of mostly Black protesters go down the street to the mayor's house. “We believe in Black Lives Matter,” they claim, “but it was like the storming of the Bastille. We were afraid for our lives.” There are two problems with this statement. First, it presumes because protesters were Black, they were more dangerous. This unconscious bias is what gives systemic racism its legs. Second, it suggests that at least sub-consciously they were aware of the privilege at play, and so the economic injustice they’re party to. That didn’t faze them. Black lives seem to matter as long as it doesn’t change the status quo or impact either their status or material wealth. I doubt if they’ll ever cry out “Mr. Tree”. That’s something most of us regrettably lose when we “grow up” in this culture, making possible extractive capitalism that disregards the environment.

I wonder if what at first seems like Malachi’s fault is what Jesus is pointing to as the secret of infants. Malachi’s not yet self-conscious, the same quality that enables a toddler to keep dipping her

brush into the dish to feed the birds, or cry out “Mr. Tree”, or to run to each other, signs that the reign of God is near. Howard Thurman reminds us that letting go of ourselves is our primary spiritual task. Divine communion requires self-surrender, open heartedness before God where we release ourselves, release the urgency of what can be to immerse ourselves in what is and so float “in the current of the life and love of God.” Our rifle toting couple are definitely self-conscious.

Self-surrender is an important virtue to practice. It was thrust on most of us by the lockdown. We couldn't, still can't, make the novel coronavirus go away. This is the circumstance in which we find ourselves. Each of us pushed into the moment, and so helped to see more clearly what's important, and more to the point, who's important. In this world we're taught to rely only on ourselves and yet know how that fails us in a lockdown. We needed to turn to each other for help and connection.

This time has opened the possibility of simplifying our lives. We hear Jesus tell us his yoke is easy. We assume he is talking about the burden of the cross but that is only because we assume that by yoke he means the device used to connect oxen together so they can plough. The yoke became a symbol of Torah, and so Jesus is saying his teaching is easy. I wonder if as well as tell us that his teaching is a light burden, he is inviting us to lighten our burden. What if the teaching that is easy is to walk lightly and simply in the world? This kind of gospel poverty, when freely embraced, helps those who practice it to love God with an undivided heart. When we have less to cling to, we can better appreciate what is around us, including a little flock of birds, and in the openness of an emptied heart make room for God's love, and the love of others as well.

This in turn helps us to create communities where we can grow in empathy and so freely support each other, share generously, and stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and those burdened by racism and other forms of injustice. This is critical as many white Canadians confront that we're not the Canada we like to think we are. Many, me included, are more like the couple “protecting” their home than we want to admit, afraid of losing what we have. We forget that we follow one who chose a life of simplicity and told his disciples to do likewise, so they could release their personal wants in favour of the needs of others. This brings us back to heavenly secrets given to infants. Children in Jesus' day were as powerless as slaves until they were of age. In hardship, the eldest adult was fed first and down it went from there. Jesus' prayer reveals that God's reign is the opposite of top down hierarchies but is aligned with the vulnerable and voiceless. “The current of life and love” we call God isn't found where hubris crowds out the divine, but where humble dependence waits in openness and creates supportive and just communities for everyone.

I don't know about you, but that vision has been on my heart this week as we all had a reflective Canada Day. Drawing on the creative energy of God, we have a chance to let go for others and in greater openness be like children and honour “Mr. Tree”, focus on the needs of a flock of birds, greet a friend without thought of racial difference, learn how to share with one another. It won't be child's play, but with Spirit's help we can live with the attitude of infants and children. Amen.