



Richmond Hill Reflections

“The Right to Good Soil” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

July 12, 2020, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Matthew 13:1-9; Excerpt from *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to See the World Differently* by Barbara A. Holmes

The bible is tricky, especially parables. They’re supposed to make us think but we often read them through the lens of what others have said. This is especially true of today’s because not only do we get the parable but usually read the “interpretation” later in the chapter. It claims to be from Jesus but what we glimpse is a sermon of sorts, the author taking Jesus’ words and applying them to a situation in his community. Taking that cue, I’d like to consider something critical for us right now, pondering the parable in terms of racism, especially through Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want to Talk about Race*, which I am reading as part of a book study with colleagues.

Before I begin, I want to share an assumption – every person, the proverbial seed, has a right to good soil, that is to thrive. This doesn’t mean there won’t be life situations that can’t be avoided, but I believe there are systemic barriers in Canada, the US, other parts of the world that prevent Black, Indigenous, other racialized people from doing so. These are grounded in biases opposite to Barbara Holmes’ assertion that we’re all citizens of the human and cosmic community, what she later calls our “self-induced dreams of control, domination, victimization, and self-hatred.” So, what are they?

Let’s begin with seeds on a path. The birds remind me of the microaggressions that I spoke about recently. Like being pecked at, they accumulate, eroding self-esteem. They’re not always verbal. Someone crosses a street, clutches a purse, follows you in a store. In my first year in ministry a couple shared with me something that happened in a local shop. She was Cree. Him white. They came in the store separately and the person working didn’t realize the woman who entered after him was his spouse. As she came in the clerk made a big sniffing noise, saying, “Ugh, I smell an Indian.” The husband went to the clerk and tore a strip off, but most often his wife faced that on her own.

More troubling is what Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour experience with police, and not just in a possible arrest. Oluo writes about how just after she got her license she was pulled over in a white neighbourhood. When she reached for the glovebox for insurance and registration, the officer went for his gun, yelled “Stop!” then lectured her how you never make a move unless you tell the officer what you’re about to do. “That’s a good way to get yourself shot,” he said. I have never told police what I’m about to do, had to think how I’m going to respond, where my hands are, text I’ve been pulled over, just in case. Black people do, perceived as a greater threat, even a teenage girl. In Canada, Black and Middle Eastern drivers are pulled over more often than white drivers, and more often ticketed, and in the US are more likely to be searched, even handcuffed. That’s just driving.

Even children are seen as a threat. Oluo shares about a five-year-old suspended for “assaulting” a teacher. A staff member wanted him charged. Really? A kindergartener? Why not talk to him, see

what's going on? It's not Canadian practice to document race in terms of student discipline but an Ontario study suggests we have a similar issue to the US where Black children are more likely suspended, expelled, referred to the police than white kids. Are they more violent? No. But that's unconscious bias at work. They're also perceived as older (that's how you kill a 12 year-old with a toy gun). Imagine the constant fear for adults, parents, kids, taking a toll, emotionally and physically.

Along with birds of fear there are weeds. At first seedlings do well but are choked out. We speak of the glass ceiling but you need to be in the building. Not only do Black, Indigenous and Latinx kids receive harsher discipline, but despite being as bright as white kids, are viewed less likely to succeed and so are less likely tested for a gifted class and more often tracked to vocational training. Class-mates do this too. Oluo writes how she aspired to go to university but was put down by other "nerdy" students (as she put it). As much as she grew, the weeds did too. She got her degree but struggled to find work, wasn't taken seriously for promotion, lost out on one initially offered. The last months I've had frank conversations with people of colour and her experience happens here. Race factors in pay disparity too. In the US the biggest gap is between Latino and white men. 69 cents to the dollar.

That speaks to plants that withered because they had nothing to root into. The image reminded me of a discussion at HAIR recently about Black Nova Scotians. In addition to freed slaves there were Black Loyalists who fought alongside the British in the Revolution plus those who did so in the War of 1812. In both cases, promises of land weren't kept. Often no title to property. Africville, close to Halifax, was the site for the city dump. Rather than bring services to the area, in the 1960s the city wanted to relocate residents. No deeds meant many didn't get full value for their homes. We ask how there is intergenerational poverty. Why wouldn't there be when these soldiers, promised so much, couldn't find work, nor their sons, generation after generation? This is not unique to Nova Scotia. Add the pay gap, higher rates of incarceration due to racial bias, difficulty getting loans to start a business or go to school. The system feels fixed. That's what Kimberly Jones names in a YouTube video. She calls out how slavery made it possible for white families to gain wealth and pass it from one generation to the next. She compares it to a monopoly game where for the first 400 rounds you play for your opponent, and when you get to play for yourself, each time you get ahead, your opponent slaps you down. It is powerful testimony and cuts through all of the "I succeeded, why can't you?" malarkey too often levelled against communities of colour.

As I shared last week, part of our spiritual journey is to let go of ourselves so love can grow and we can nurture supportive communities, in other words, so we can cultivate good soil. For those of us who are white, that means facing hard truths about the world as it really is for too many. Jesus challenged the injustices of his world and is with us as we do the same. Holmes reminds us that we can't be "hamsters on a wheel" propping up an unjust system. As "seekers of light and life" we need to work together for a world where "the foundations for hierarchy, dominance, and rationality are crumbling, [and] proponents of... equity have found their public voices." That's what we see in protests, hear in calls to defund police, witness in people rallying to ensure there are the means for everyone, everyone, to thrive. I believe Spirit is at work in this, reminding us that if we're all made in God's image, which we profess, seeds shouldn't be pecked at, seedlings should have enough soil, not be choked out by weeds. Instead, there needs to be good soil for us all. So let's all cultivate that. Amen.