



Richmond Hill Reflections

“What Discipleship Looks Like” (Preached by Jess Swance-Smith)

June 21, 2020 Indigenous Peoples Sunday (Third Sunday after Pentecost)

Reading: Matthew 10:29-37; “The Year the Roses Died” from *Plants Have Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask: Anishnaabe Botanical Teachings* by Mary Siisip Geniusz

“I did not intend my life to be like this”, I can almost hear *Waaboz*, Rabbit, uttering these words as Coyote and Wolf begin pulling him every which way. A myriad of regrets, should-haves and would-ofs, I imagine, ran through Rabbit’s mind as he was being accused of an atrocity that was actually brought on by a collective of creatures, not just him. We have been hearing countless stories of racialized folks in the Black and Indigenous communities, whose stories could have been titled with “I did not intend my life to be like this”, I did not intend to be born into a community where skin colour or family origin determined fate, social class or the personal safety of a whole community, at the hands of a collective oppressive system.

How many times throughout our lives have we thought or uttered the words, “I did not intend my life to be like this”, it could have been something as minor as a fender bender (having to deal with insurance), or something more impactful like having an unplanned child. I have been reflecting on these words over the last two weeks as I witness the Toronto Indigenous community, fight the ongoing battle for basic rights for Indigenous people, for the safety of community and even the slightest bit of understanding. My thoughts have led me to witnessing the privilege that exists in those words and the actions that are possible after such a statement. I began working for the church as the TRC reports were coming out, I worked on the Calls to the Church document that the United Church has put out. ...but as I dove deeper into the work of reconciliation, I found myself thinking “I didn’t intend my ministry to be like this”, I did not realize how privileged those thoughts really were.

What does discipleship look like when faced with the challenge of climate change or Reconciliation? It is rather intimidating on the onset when we are confronted with all of the challenges and issues at once. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is addressing the disciples, readying them for the challenge of facing the world that has shut them out as people who follow Jesus - a man who advocated for the marginalized, fought against the oppressive systems of the Roman rulers, and who encouraged his followers to take up the cross - a symbol of solidarity with marginalized people. But, as you can imagine, they are scared! They are being sent out into a world that will contradict their teachings, throw fact at assumed fiction, who will beat them and torture them. Jesus stands, addressing his friends and followers, telling them exactly as it is without sugar coating any expectations they might have. He’s really telling the disciples the truth of how the world will treat them, but the most important element of his address is that he reassures their fears by reminding them about the integral relationship that is affirmed between the disciples and Jesus, and through God.

God is described in this passage as the one who can destroy both body and soul, yet we fear the powers that can kill the body. The writer of Matthew is not suggesting that God holds power over humans, but that we are invited into relationship with a God who cares for even those who are seen as worthless as sparrows who are sold two for a penny. We know though, that God cares for all of Creation. We know that we are known so intimately to the God who created us that even the hairs on our heads are counted. Have you ever thought about how much hair falls from your head on a daily basis? If you are constantly growing and losing hair, God is ever present, counting every day. Indigenous communities have come to fear, quite literally, the powers that have had the potential of killing the body because of the long history of colonization and violence associated with authorities. Indigenous communities have also come to fear the powers that have polluted, destroyed and

lay claim to Creation- the water and the land. Indigenous lives are so entwined with Creation that when climate and Creation are harmed, Indigenous lives are at risk as well.

We know so well the creation stories found in Genesis, the careful creation of each important element that exists to sustain life. What we don't hear about is the interdependence that exists between each element. In the Anishinaabe creation stories, similar to Christian creation stories, humanity is created last. In Ojibwe, the Earth is referred to as *Ninga* "my own mother". As the last part of Created creation, we are told humankind is the youngest, therefore, the most dependent on of all the forms of life. Mary Siisip Geniusz tells about the four orders of life. The first created are the elder beings which are the earth forces - the minerals, rocks, wind and rain, the thunderbirds and everything that we refer to as weather. The elder beings are also our ancestors - the grandmothers and grandfathers, the ceremonies and songs. The second order is the plant life, the trees, thorny bushes, the food sources. The third created order are all the non-human beings, the four legged, the winged, the creepers and the crawlers, the swimmers. And the last order created, the youngest and the most vulnerable, are the humans beings. Each of the four orders are interconnected, not one order can survive without the other, except for the first order of beings. However, the grandmothers and grandfathers would not be happy because their instructions from Creator was to help sustain and see that all life continued as Creator had intended.

This teaching sees human beings as the weakest because we rely on the other three orders to survive. Humans were placed on earth to care and maintain and to have an intimate relationship with the other orders we should be in relations with. We are not the rulers of the earth and *Ninga* reminds us of this when hurricanes and tornados threaten the most developed places. We are all in this life together, and to survive, we need to work together to ensure that we are living out the intention we were born with - to intimately know the ways of the earth. We have become disconnected from our earth so much that when we walk out of our homes we often can't name all of the plants and animals within our vision. Maybe it started when we no longer had to sit in the wilderness to hunt for food, when we stopped feeling the soil between our fingers while we dug for the miracle of the harvest. Somewhere we have become so disconnected from the other three orders that we no longer believe we are interconnected or reliant on the rain to keep our earth growing or the snow that lets *Ninga* rest or the teachings of the Black community and Indigenous communities. We are the babies, who call on "our own mother", the earth to take care of us. So, we have work to do.

There is a teaching that says that the Earth knows exactly what we need, when we need it. So last year, my partner Evan and I spread some sage seeds along our front garden. We weren't really sure if they would grow since our front yard runs along a walking path. Often garbage blows through the fence or birds rummage around the garden. We thought we would try to grow them anyways. This year, the sage has come up really strong and in abundance. Just the other week, a friend of ours invited us over to have a socially distanced swim at their house so we could help thin out the over-crowded sage garden that was seeded last year. The medicines are growing, and they are growing in great abundance which means we have work to do. The world is not ending because of COVID-19. The world is not ending because of Black Lives Matter or Indigenous protests. The world is not ending because of Climate Change. We do have work to do though. Sage is used for smudging and for clearing the air of toxins and negative energy. Whenever something is about to begin - be it a ceremony, a gathering, maybe it's a new drum - a smudge is always sent around the space so that whatever is being done, can start in a good and positive way - without negativity, without toxic air or ideologies. It is a new beginning, the smell reminds us of that, the smoke sends our prayers to Creator.

The thing is, we don't have to smudge to acknowledge a new beginning. Each morning as the sun rises, and we wake from a night of sleep, is the beginning of a new day. Everyday there is a chance for change - to set your heart on doing something positive. To say, "this IS what I intended my life to be", "this is what I intend for the seven generations after me". Take up the call of discipleship, acknowledge the fear you have, the apprehension you may feel, the weight of being only one person in the push for change— know that the Love of a God who constantly counts all of your hairs - maybe even blesses that near balding scalp, knows exactly

what needs to be done in our communities, will elevate your voice and actions to where they are needed, and will walk with each of us as we carry out that work, as we stumble precariously trying to find the right path.