

Sermon

June 28, 2020

Last Sunday I left the church after the 9:30 service in a bit of a daze, maybe others did too. I had been swept over and immersed in Pastor Hergy's sermon, his and Trudy's story of living in Detroit of the late 1960s. To hear of their lives as they witnessed the rampant racism of that time, lived and worked within the black community, and his response as a person of faith. It didn't end then and there. You remember that years later, in Vancouver, Pastor Hergy supported an Ethiopian man, new to Canada and newly employed, by giving him his own, newly renovated church office as his work space. Pastor Hergy was soon confronted by a congregational member who disagreed with the arrangement, and said so in strong and racist language. He was stunned and his response was in the defence of his actions and the man trying to re-establish his life in Canada. Black Lives Matter! My understanding was deepening profoundly. I was caught up and overwhelmed by not only the power of the story and its message, but by Pastor Hergy's passion and emotion, his anger and his pain, his reliving these times of his past. At moments I wanted to laugh and several times I could have cried, maybe I should have, however my heritage and culture have taught me otherwise! I was also, again, appalled by the depth and horrors of systemic racism. I also heard the joy and richness that has been part of and shaped their lives because of the relationships that they have had with people of colour and their communities. Finally, with utmost clarity I heard an unshakeable faith in a present, compassionate and just God.

I was glad for the half hour drive back to Langdale to absorb and process what I had heard and felt. Once home I plugged back into the day as planned, family gathered, Father's Day celebration, a walk and ice cream in lower Gibsons and a lovely meal together at home. But not far from my mind were Pastor Hergy's sermon and the scripture lessons I had already read for this Sunday. It felt overwhelming! How and what was I going to distill from all of this, something of meaning to me and to you? Plus.....it's getting pretty close to 20 years since I did this with any regularity! Yikes! I asked for divine presence and inspiration, and opened the computer.

What has stayed with me is the power of the story, as it reveals its message and the storyteller, to bring us into new relationships with each other and God.

We've heard and/or read Pastor Hergy's story. We know him better for his experiences shared, he has revealed something of himself to us, and we know where he stands on racism. Black Lives Matter! He has opened himself to us and our responses, our stories. We know he believes that every single human being is worthy of God's eternal love only through "God's

grace, Christ's love and the Spirit's presence". And we are all called to act likewise to the very best of our abilities, again and again.

Pastor Hergy lives with us in this time and place, in 2020 on the Sunshine Coast of BC. We understand each other, we hope, so to speak. He preached, I believe, with great clarity. I heard the story and I deeply hope I got the message. I'm absolutely sure, as well, that if you or I wanted to have more conversation, ask questions, be curious about racism, his belief and his experience, he would welcome the opportunity to sit down together and have that conversation, to help us understand, to soak in the message.

The biblical authors and storytellers are from radically different times and places. Their experiences, languages, social contexts, faith constructs are profoundly different from ours. Abraham is put to a test that we cannot imagine! Paul uses the concept and language of slavery that is terribly offensive to us today, Matthew's gospel asks us to welcome..... prophets and disciples?!

As I did a bit of research on the story in Genesis a couple of the commentators really thought that the story of Abraham and Isaac simply doesn't have anything good to say and has no place in our lectionary. And there is no denying it, it is horrific. The notion of God's testing Abraham in that way is to our minds so damaging, and contrary to what God has promised. How can a great nation come forth from this child, so longed for, when his father is being asked to kill the child in sacrifice, a human sacrifice? Not to mention the psychological damage! We are appalled at the terror that the child was subjected to as well. Then the boy is saved at the last moment! And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. What in the world is God trying to say to us in the midst of this terrible scenario? What can we possibly salvage from this that makes any meaning for us? Rev. Dr. Paul Nancarrow a retired Episcopal priest, teacher and author of a theology blog, points out that our minds, our way of thinking is very different from that of the story tellers and writers of Genesis thousands of years ago. We are children of the Enlightenment, we think logically and morally. Those are the filters we use as we read this story. We can't help it. Nancarrow's says this, *The ancient author(s) of this story had no such compunction; to them it was axiomatic that God's ways are mysterious, that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord," and that often we cannot know what God is doing until the thing is done and the meaning can be revealed in retrospect.* In other words, the ancient authors didn't rationalize and moralize in the same way that our minds do today. Nancarrow points out that it was unquestionable (axiomatic) that God's ways are mysterious and unknown to us. Culturally, in our scientific age we don't like mysterious and unknown. It is really hard for us to sit with mystery. Plus it is, most often only in hindsight that the meaning is revealed, God will provide, in God's time and ways. The ram is there in the bushes, to the side, out of Abraham's direct line of vision. The story is told from a

different framework than ours, so we have to learn what that framework might be. There is new meaning once we begin to understand a different framework. In this case a framework, a way to thinking, of the ancient Hebrew people. Is this not how we need to listen to the stories of one another – that maybe the other is coming from a very different context or framework than mine? I need to be curious, to ask the questions. To say, I don't understand, tell me more. And then we can begin hear... and see... and understand, more clearly our common life in the ongoing presence of a loving, and mysterious God that does provide.

In the reading from Romans we again experience the same kind of confusion and distraction from what Paul is really saying. The word and concept of "slavery" to anyone or anything is really uncomfortable and disturbing for us today. However, within the Hellenistic culture and setting for Paul and the new Christian community in Rome this was a metaphor that worked. In brief, and thank you to the insights of Dr. Nancarrow, he writes, *"the more genuine meaning [exists] by remembering that 'slavery' in Hellenistic society was often a matter of being bound to a particular household. In functional terms, what Paul is attempting to describe here is leaving one sort of household or system of interpersonal relations, in order to join another."* Paul describes two "households"; one of Sin, characterized by relationships based on selfish need, greed and manipulation, grounded in law and one of Grace, in which this new Christian community is based, *"a system characterized by receiving and offering in freedom and gratitude"*. And this household of Grace is a gift of God, without strings attached, in which the participants can offer themselves, body, spirit and mind fully to the new relationships built in the, love and grace of God. Again, the meaning and the message are more fully revealed when we can peel back Paul's context to expose a message that can be heard. This framework of the Hellenistic times will hide from us what Paul was really telling the Christians of Rome. We have to ask the questions, be curious, and take the time to learn.

The Gospel reading seems the easiest for us to grasp today, but maybe not the easiest to act on. In our culture we are taught to welcome people and show hospitality. In our way of thinking, maybe 'hospitality' is more commonly connected to the hospitality industry! Dr. Nancarrow writes, *"The 'reward' of participation in divine life always begins in 'welcome,' in receiving openly and honestly and with a genuine appreciation of the other's gifts and needs and identity. God does not accept a person because of anything that person has done to 'earn' or 'deserve' God's love, but only because a person is open to welcome God's love."* To really welcome someone means to become vulnerable to them, putting yourself "out there"; to open yourself, to give of who you are, to be willing to engage in a relationship. In doing so "the other" is invited to do the same without judgement. In this action of genuinely welcoming and providing hospitality we participate in divine life that is of God, of Jesus, of the disciples, and of those who have welcomed and cared for us. Even the simple, simple act of giving a 'little one' a glass of cool water is significant.

In the midst of a pandemic, racism, rampant fear and judgement we are still in the presence of a loving and compassionate God. We are in the embracing presence of God who does and will provide for us again and again, who as Spirit is among us, who, as Jesus, welcomes us. We have a long lineage of storytellers and people of faith to learn from; Abraham, Paul, Matthew and so many more including your pastor and, well, one another. Listen deeply to other's stories, be curious, tell your own. Offer a glass of cold water, be welcoming and gracious, be patient, and non-judgemental of your neighbours and strangers. God will provide for us what we need....always..... in God's time, in God's ways. Look up, look around and be in the love and mystery that is God.

Amen