

Sermon
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, July 7th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: 2 SAMUEL 5:1-5, 9-10; PSALM 48; 2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-10; MARK 6:1-
13

I wonder if you know the song “Pennies From Heaven”? There is a line in it about umbrellas. I’m sure you’re wondering “Where is she going with this?” but stay with me! ☺

We’ve just heard about Jesus’s return to his hometown – and about the resistance and rejection he faces there. We heard from Mark’s Gospel today, but this story also features in Matthew and Luke. In Luke it’s even more stark: they try to run Jesus off a cliff!

Jesus has been on the move, healing, teaching. He returns to the place where he grew up and is surrounded by those who have known him the longest, and those people find that Jesus is not what they expected. There is an energy and a momentum that is different – unfamiliar. The way that Jesus moved in his ministry was unfamiliar to them. That first century world was all about external actions and measures, about challenge and response, honour and dishonour. Jesus did things a different way! Those in Jesus’s hometown are first “astounded”,

but instead of astonishment taking them into a place of wonder and possibility, they “take offence at him”. They resist what is unexpected and unfamiliar to them.

Moving from what we know – from what we expect – into something unfamiliar. It can be exciting. It can feel fresh, and new. But we’re not so straightforward in our humanity, are we? Sometimes that change, that moving into the unknown awakens a vulnerability in us. Sometimes, out of that vulnerability, we want to deflect change. We want to resist it. Out of that vulnerability, we find ourselves wanting to protect ourselves from that newness, from that unfamiliarity.

This is what I feel from those resisting Jesus in today’s scene in Nazareth. I feel fear and uncertainty. I feel a “digging in” in their offence...

This is where the umbrellas come in! What are we likely to do in a downpour?

We’re probably going to hold that umbrella very firmly over our heads, aren’t we?

I’m going to suggest that reluctance to move into the unfamiliar is a little bit like

holding an umbrella very firmly over our heads. I can almost see those with Jesus

in today’s scene standing around with umbrellas. In their fear and uncertainty, up

go those umbrellas, and with each protest – with each “Who does he think he is?”

– they hunch further underneath them!

We heard that Jesus is “amazed at the unbelief” of those around him. What does he do when he is faced with this unbelief? He knows that those around him don’t need to hunch under their umbrellas, but he doesn’t wallow in it. He keeps moving – moving on to the next village and teaching. And, he sends the disciples out. As he instructs them not to take anything with them, he is inviting them into a place of unfamiliarity. He is sending them into the unknown. There is tremendous potential for them to feel vulnerable. Perhaps we can hear, in Jesus giving the disciples authority over the unclean spirits, that they didn’t need umbrellas! Alive, in this, today, I can certainly hear that we don’t need to hunch under an umbrella – we don’t need to “dig in” and resist – when we’re faced with change and feeling vulnerable. We can move around in that change, looking at it from different angles! Jesus is with us, today, in all our vulnerability, walking with us through change, into the unknown. The Holy Spirit works in and in all things, both familiar and unfamiliar.

Back to that song, Pennies from Heaven. The line about umbrellas. It says: “Be sure that your umbrella is upside down.”

What if the difference between faith and unfaith, between belief and unbelief is the way we hold our umbrellas? What if we think of God’s grace filling those umbrellas, held upside down? What if we think of Jesus, there with us,

inviting us to hold our umbrellas upside down, inviting the Spirit to shower upon us? What if we then, immerse ourselves in that grace? What if holding the umbrella too tightly over our heads is a missed opportunity for that faithful immersion? God's grace cannot be controlled, and it certainly can't be deflected with an umbrella, but fear and resistance are inhibiting; faith opens and invites grace...and growth, and transformation and change.

This is part of a Celtic prayer:

“Be the eye of God dwelling within me,

The foot of Christ in guidance with me,

The shower of the Spirit pouring on me, richly and generously.” [Repeat]

We don't need to hunch under an umbrella as we find our way through this life. Jesus is with us in all things. The Holy Spirit works all around us, all the time. God's love and grace is flowing everywhere and we are all invited to live life it shower upon us. We are invited to let ourselves be immersed in that love and grace, and to let it overflow from us to others, and into the world.

Think about how we move when we're trying very hard to keep an umbrella over our heads. Our movements are limited. Our view – perspective – is limited. We're not able to engage with others as freely. Jesus invites us to think about

how we are moving in the world, and about what we are holding as we go. Writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley wrote this in his book “Island”:

“Lightly child, lightly. Learn to do everything lightly.

Yes, feel lightly even though you’re feeling deeply.

Just lightly let things happen and lightly cope with them...

... So throw away your baggage and go forward.

There are quicksands all about you, sucking at your feet,
trying to suck you down into fear and self-pity and despair.

That’s why you must walk so lightly.

Lightly my darling,

on tiptoes and no luggage,

not even a sponge bag,

completely unencumbered.”

Jesus sends the disciples unencumbered, with no baggage – no bread, no bag, no money in their belts. If they are not welcome, they are instructed to shake the dust off their feet. They are to keep moving, and not to let that dust accumulate on their feet, bogging them down. They are to go lightly! And we, as followers of Jesus, are to go lightly. We are invited to think about what we are

holding as we go, and we're to put down – and to shake off – what hinders and hampers our movement. At our Tuesday Lectio Divina and Eucharist gathering we pray this:

“...Whether the future be dark or bright, the road be smooth or rough, whether our cares be light or heavy, our song be strong or weak, keep our hearts warm and our hands open, our lives ever embracing and ever embraced by your love.”

We can't move with open hands if we're clinging tightly to an umbrella over our heads, or if we're carrying baggage – if we're dragging around suitcases of fear or offence or harsh judgement as we move through life. It is open hands and open minds that keep our hearts warm on this life's journey. It is unencumbered movement with God's love and grace that we're invited into. It's a willingness to be showered with that grace that God calls us to.

May our time here this morning make space for us to put down some of what hinders us and holds us back. May we go lightly from this place and into the world. As you make your way through the week, ask yourself which way you've got your umbrella! May we all turn our umbrellas upside down, and in the words of that Celtic prayer again; may the shower of the Spirit pour on us richly and generously, today, and every day. Amen.