

“Dispatch from the Centre of the Universe”

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25 August 2013

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “A Wake Up Call” by Vanessa Rush Southern

One year while I was in graduate school, a friend who was worried about my safety gave me a personal alarm as a present. This red box fit neatly in my pocket and had a button and a pull cord (like a grenade), either of which would set it off in wild peals of noise. I carried the alarm with me for a few months, but fortunately never did need it. The day I decided not to carry it any longer was the day I set it off in my coat pocket.

It was a bitterly cold day in the fall, and I had spent the better part of the morning on a tour of a historic cemetery in town. I was exhausted and didn't notice at all when I set off the alarm while reaching into my pocket for a subway token.

The whole train ride I wondered what the alarm was about. Was there a fire? Were they testing some emergency system? At each station the sound was the same. How annoying, I thought.

When I got off the train I heard the sound in the parking lot. People were agitated and looking around confused. When I went into the supermarket, it was the same story. Everyone looked around, this way and that, staring and wondering aloud what that sound was. A couple of them asked me about it and I looked at them, innocent and ignorant, and said I didn't know. It must be some holdover from the Cold War, I mused to myself. What a great story it would make in the next day's paper, I thought.

And then, amid my musings, I stopped to ask a stock boy where I might find the popcorn. He looked at me, nodding his head in silence and with hesitation as if he were thinking something over in his head. “I'll tell you,” he finally replied, “but only if you'll tell me about that noise.” Completely tired of the

whole business, I said to him in exasperation that I had no idea what the noise was about and wondered why so many people seemed to think I might.

“Because, lady,” said the stock boy, with the nonchalant indifference of one who had seen it all, “it’s coming from you.”

Never has a face turned red as fast as mine did that moment when I realized that he was right, that this sound (that had plagued me for the better part of an hour) had, indeed, been coming from me. There in my pocket was that little red box with its little black button in the ON position.

How many times do we walk around with alarms going off in our pockets? How often does everyone else around us realize that something having to do with us is seriously wrong, and we just mosey along, slightly agitated in our journey? How many times in a day or a year are we completely oblivious to the effect we are having on people, even though it is the same effect on person after person? And how often would we rather make up the most elaborate excuses for why the world responds to us the way it does, rather than take responsibility for who we are and what that invites into our lives?

I just hope the next time I walk around with a personal alarm system going off in my pocket that someone is bold enough to look me in the eye and ask me what I am doing. Then, when I deny the charges, I hope he or she is able to say, without much pretense, that what is going on is, indeed, coming from me. And I hope the truth of what that person is saying will be as impossible to ignore.

Sermon: “Dispatch from the Centre of the Universe”

Have you seen that clever word map of Canada?

The one that’s been floating around facebook and maybe other places.

The one that uses a range of nouns to paint a word picture of this country.

The one that sort of hits a nerve by speaking to Canada’s stereotypes, pointing out charming idiosyncrasies with the words artfully arranged in the shape of each province.

For the uninitiated, it is quick thumbnail sketch of Canada.

For New Brunswick, it notes that to be the home of people who talk funny.

For Newfoundland: people who talk really funny.

It calls Nova Scotia New Ireland.

Quebec is maple syrup, French, poutine, Catholics,
and protestors who protest everything.

Manitoba: too cold in winter, too hot in summer. Black flies. Boring.

Saskatchewan: the flat part, in the middle, farms, farms, farms.

Alberta: oil, oil, oil. Betcha didn't know we had so much oil.
And, around Calgary: Cowboys, bibles, rich people.

BC: Trees, beavers, and bears. Mountains and marijuana. Rain, rain, rain.
And, it adds: All the people who could afford to leave Ontario.
In Vancouver: snobs. And on Vancouver Island: hippies!

The Yukon is cold, cold, cold. Really, really, really cold.

The Northwest Territories is the home of Santa, permafrost, and igloos.

Nunavut is ice, ice, ice. And diamonds, polar bears, and Big Foot.

And, in the middle of it all, sits Ontario, dominated by Toronto:
"Centre of the Whole Freaking Universe," it reads,
and home of smog, bad politicians and a terrible hockey team.

That's what it says. I didn't write this.

(And, I'd argue that the smog isn't as bad as it once was
and that the Leafs occasionally show some promise.
Though I won't challenge the opinion about at least some of our politicians.)

I have now lived in Canada long enough to know
that this map was made by someone who lives in the Rest of Canada.

I have travelled enough of the country to appreciate
that some of what is spelled out here is, well, actually true.

And, I've encountered enough people who really dislike Toronto to understand that we have an image problem, decades, if not centuries, in the making.

I've had Montrealers, who've never bothered to travel to our fair city, tell me everything that's wrong with it.

And, I've had a guy in BC explain that the primary purpose of the Rockies is to keep Torontonians out.

The very first week I moved to Canada, the CBC aired a programme entitled "Why Everyone Hates Toronto".

It was quite a fascinating programme to watch as a newcomer! I started to wonder what I had gotten myself, not to mention Bob, into.

The truth is, though, I quite like living here in the centre of the universe, or at least the centre of the country, in this amazing, frenetic hub of culture, music, art, history, political intrigue, and multicultural promise.

It's not perfect, but it's a fascinating place to live.

And, yet, I do understand at least some of people's irritation, if not resentment of Toronto.

Maybe we are perhaps a bit too preoccupied with what goes on here, at times.

As someone from New Brunswick put it to me a couple of years ago, "we get tired," he said, "of *The Globe and Mail* being Toronto's "national newspaper."

Sure enough, it's not easy to put up with someone who talks only and endlessly about themselves.

It can be beyond frustrating to be in relationship with people who are profoundly self-centred, who have such a high self-regard that they are oblivious or indifferent to the needs of those around them.

And, as challenging as it is to suffer someone like this in our lives, it's even worse, when we're made to realize that we are that person, at least we are, in a given moment or situation.

There's a story told of a flight from Johannesburg a few years ago. Before the plane even left the ground, there was trouble brewing.

A middle-aged, well-off white South African woman was terribly distressed to discover that she had been seated next to a black man.

She quickly called the flight attendant over to complain about her predicament.

"What seems to be the problem Madam?," the flight attendant asked.

"Can't you see?," she said, as though he wasn't there, "You've sat me next to a kaffir. I can't possibly sit next to him. Won't you find me another seat?!"

"Mam, please calm down. The flight is very full today. But I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll go and check to see if we have any other seats available in first class."

The woman cocked a snooty glare at the black man beside her (as well as to the surrounding passengers who were looking on in horror).

A few minutes later the flight attendant returned with good news, which she delivered to the woman, who couldn't help but now look about at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin.

"Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is completely full. However, we do have one seat in first class."

Before the woman had a chance to answer, the flight attendant explained: "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I have had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that anyone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person."

And, with that, the flight attendant turned to the man and said, "Sir, if you'd like to get your things,

we have a seat ready for you up in first class.”

At that point, the surrounding passengers gave a standing ovation while the man took his new seat in the front of the plane.

There are times in this life
when each of us needs to be reminded that it's not all about us—
when we need to be shaken up to see
that we aren't exactly the centre of the universe.

There are times when we need to be put in our place—
our place stitched into the fabric of life,
right along with everyone and everything else.

In hearing this story, I imagine we found ourselves right there,
cheering along with the passengers as the man moved toward his new seat.

And, yet, I find myself wondering about the woman—
likely still stewing in a rage at her seat back in economy.

I'm not sure, from what we know of her,
whether she was capable of embarrassment,
let alone the healthy mortification her behaviour merited.

But, I hope, as she sat there, that she did feel her cheeks flush with shame.

That in the awkward silence of the hours that followed on that flight,
that she truly wondered at what that was all about,
how she could have found her expectations so upended,
and a plane-full of people so enthusiastically applauding her come-uppance.

And I hope she walked off that plane a different person.
Alive. Awake. And aware that she lives within a web of being
that demands she summon respect and compassion and understanding
for her fellow travellers, not merely on that plane,
but on the whole of the journey through this life.

Now, her behaviour was beyond obnoxious.
It was outrageous.

It's easy to heap scorn and ridicule

and bask in the Schadenfreude of seeing her get her just desserts.

And, yet, is any one of us so far removed from her bad example?

Is anybody here confidently always above reproach,
beyond all risk of hurting others,
beyond our oh-so-human capacity to be selfish and self-absorbed?

I know I, for one, am not.

A few years ago, I noticed how easy it is for me to think ill of
those travelling around the city
by modes of transportation different from mine in a given moment.

When I'm walking, I'm aghast at the bicyclists
who thoughtlessly barrel down the sidewalks,
or the cars that sail through an intersection
when I clearly have the right-of-way.

When I'm stepping off the streetcar,
I'm appalled at the cars that endanger my life and the lives of others
by not coming to a full stop behind the opening doors.

And when I'm driving, I'm frustrated with the pedestrians
who jaywalk in front of me, as though I can instantly stop a vehicle travelling
40 kilometres an hour—and with the bicyclists
who refuse to abide by the laws, thus putting us both at risk.

What I'm amazed by, though, is how easy it has been
for me to “other” the other people in these situations.

How readily I can fall into thinking it's all about me,
depending on the form of transit I'm using.

(Am I the only person that has done this?!)

I've been intrigued about a movement afoot in urban design
that involves the removal of all street signs
and the abandonment of most traffic laws.

Of course, you would think it would result in absolute chaos,

not to mention murder and mayhem on the streets.

But the effect has actually been just the opposite.

It turns out that by removing stop signs and speed limits, everyone has to take on a shared responsibility for the streets and for the sidewalks.

People automatically slow down because they no longer feel they actually own the road. The feeling of entitlement is stripped away, as everyone is expected to negotiate the common space.

Where it's been tried, fatalities and accidents have dropped dramatically.

What happens is that this approach causes people to see that they are part of something bigger.

And, it, quite literally, changes what people see by stripping away their tunnel vision, by bursting the bubble in which they've been encased.

Suddenly, people see the world around them, and they see it from different points of view.

There's something about being on a bicycle and coming to think like a pedestrian.

There's something about being behind the wheel of a vehicle and considering how the intersection must look to a person on a bike or a person pushing a baby carriage.

There's something to being a human who truly sees the people around you and being made to realize that everyone is trying to get somewhere, that everyone has a story—and a life that is just as precious as yours.

It's a lesson that we desperately need in our citified lives, where it's so easy to be the centre of our own universe, here within a city already widely derided as such.

Fortunately, it's a lesson that is portable,
a way of being we can carry with us from the street
into our office, our classroom, our home, or even our congregation.

It just takes a shift in our perspective, an adjustment of our attitude.

Many, if not most, of the world's great religions
can be seen as a vehicle for moving us beyond
our sometimes selfish obsession with ourselves
to genuine, compassionate regard toward others.

For Buddhism it's called loving-kindness, for Christians charity,
for Islam zakat, for Jews mitzvahs, and for Pagans
reverence for the unified whole of which each is a part.

These paths offer a practice to move people from "me" to "we,"
from an overly developed self-regard
to a growing concern for the wider world.

Now this doesn't mean that the individual is in any way unimportant.

In these religious systems, and probably in ours more than most,
there is a place of pride given to personal agency and responsibility.

It is our freedom to act, after all, that makes our choices meaningful.

Which is why leading an intentional life arguably
requires that we be sufficiently self-aware.

This often means doing our own work—
which so often boils down to the messy, awkward, and embarrassing effort
that's sometimes required to grasp that it's not all about us,
that we actually aren't the centre of the universe.

Getting there, truly getting it, sometimes, paradoxically,
means that it *is* about us—like in the story I shared with you earlier,
with the woman's crazy alarm sounding off in her pocket.

There are times when we need to get a good handle on our own stuff
so that we can be of meaningful service to others.

So, I'm here to say that it's not all about you, but that sometimes it is. . .

May we live well into this seeming contradiction.

May we be alive to ourselves.

Aware of all those with whom we travel.

And awake to the blessed journey that we share.

That we might show to all the world
that the centre of the universe is a place
fashioned from compassion, understanding, and love.

And that it can, amazingly, actually be found, even in a place called Toronto.

Amen.