

“The Compelling Case for Interdependence”

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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 “Kindness” – Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
 purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,

and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

Sermon: “The Compelling Case for Interdependence”

Once, in the wee hours of the night, a burglar broke into a house.

As he made his way through the home,
he shone his flashlight around, looking for valuables,
when a voice in the dark said, “Jesus knows you’re here.”

The burglar, nearly jumping out of his skin,
clicked off his flashlight and froze.

When he heard nothing more,
he shook his head in disbelief and continued with his work.

Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires,
he heard the warning once again: “Jesus is watching you.”

At this point, totally freaked out,
he shone his light around frantically,
looking for the source of the strange voice.

Finally, in the corner of the room,
his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot.

“Did you say that?,” he hissed at the parrot.

“Yep,” the parrot confessed, and then squawked,
“I’m just trying to warn you that you’re being watched.”

The burglar relaxed.
“Warn me, huh? Who in the world are you?”

“Moses,” said the bird.

“Moses?” the burglar chuckled.

“What kind of people would name a bird Moses?”

And the bird replied,

“The same kind of people that would name a Rottweiler Jesus.”

§

There are times when we want—and desperately need—to be alone.

Moments when we don't want someone looking over our shoulder,
or watching our every move.

Times when Jean-Paul Sartre's famous quip rings so very true—
that “hell *is* other people” (as well as the pets who impersonate them!).

It can be enough at some points in our life
to cause us to pull away or run away, to strike out on our own,
to lean into whatever independent streak we might have going on,
and choose, quite happily, to go it alone.

As a profound introvert, I appreciate the need,
in every fiber of my being, to have time alone.
Time to hear myself think. Time to renew and refuel.

Perhaps more than most, I understand and honour the need people have
to be by themselves, at least from time to time.

But, to be clear, it's not that kind of alone-time
I'm talking about this morning.

I'm speaking of the type of going it alone
that is so self-involved that there's no real recognition
there are others on the journey.

The going it alone that overestimates the ability any of us has
to create ourselves—that refuses to see
that we all stand on the shoulders of giants (and non-giants),
and are shaped, and supported, and sustained
by a great web of life we can scarcely comprehend
and by the work of people, past and present, who we will never meet.

The going it alone that refuses to see that everything we are
and everything we are becoming flows from what has come before us,
what has given us a foothold, what has been sacrificed and spent
on our behalf, in order that we might be alive, here and now.

To put it another way, there are no solo acts in this life.

Sure, there are solo parts from time to time.

And while we may shine out here and improvise for a moment there as we play our part in life, starting at birth, we join in a symphony that's already been underway for a very long time.

That's why I find there's such an irritating narcissism to anyone claiming to be a self-made person.

A kind of arrogance that takes far too much credit, and certainly more credit than is due.

One of its most grating voices—and at least to me, most dangerous—is found often these days in a brand of politics that speaks of us as mere taxpayers—and demands we pay only the minimum dues we can get away with.

A view that resists seeing us all as citizens of a common enterprise, bound together in a mutual and irrevocable trust and responsible to one another for our shared well-being.

We are born to be so much more than mere taxpayers.

To be human is to recognize our common humanity, to know and feel and act as members of a commonwealth, in its oldest and truest sense—as the common good.

To lose sight of that bond and the obligations it brings is to break faith with our own humanity.

Sadly, all around, in our city and our country and our world, there is evidence of this broken faith.

In the plight of the poor, who lack the basic necessities of life.

In the living conditions of our Aboriginal neighbours, who are too often denied the dignity due them, let alone the resources that are rightfully theirs.

Our broken faith with humanity can be seen in the hollow faces of those who live on our streets because budgets are inadequate to contend with the realities of those who struggle with mental health and addiction.

And it can also be found in the balance sheets of corporations who, with unchecked power, are exploiting the planet and leaving our covenant with the earth in tatters.

It's on display in omnibus spending bills that sail through Parliament, while defying the consultation and compromise that are essential to the health of our democracy.

And it's on display in the poisoned politics that has so come to dominate our collective discourse that it's difficult to see a viable way forward to dealing with our biggest problems.

Now, that's just some of the evidence at the top of my list at the moment.

I'm sure you have your own. In fact, I'm certain you do. I say that because many of you have shared your lists with me...!

Now, you may recall that I set out talking about setting out on our own.

Since it can, at times, be great fun to wag our fingers at other people, you may be thinking it would be awfully nice if I got back to that.

So, if you're looking to the structure of my sermon and wondering when that thread will return, this is the moment.

It would be easy, and, probably a bit fun, to wag our collective fingers. There is, of course, an awful lot to wag our fingers at.

To be sure, there are antagonists in all this that should and must be held to account if things are going to change.

But I've also shared some of the signs of how we've broken faith in our commonwealth because it would be so easy to forget that we, ourselves, can be so easily counted among those who've chosen to go it alone, at least at times.

Given how high the stakes are, we would do well to beware and be aware of the seductions of self-righteousness.

Because they can be used to so readily justify our own behaviour. So easily confirm our moral superiority.

So quickly absolve us of responsibility.

And so swiftly paralyze us into inaction or fill us with anger
that we're no longer effective advocates for our values in this world.

Our self-righteousness can also convince us
that we can keep our fear of vulnerability at bay.

It can work for a time.
Anger and certitude can be reliable tools for getting stuff done, after all.

But I have little hope they're going to repair our broken covenant
or restore faith in the common bond of our shared humanity.
We need another tool.

I believe, as is so often the case, that a poet points the way.¹

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

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¹ "Kindness" – Naomi Shihab Nye

and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

It is in seeing our shared vulnerability
that we recognize our shared humanity.

When we know in our bones that
“there but for the grace of God go I...,”
we begin to make room for the possibility of a different kind of world—
a world where we respond to hardships with kindness and compassion,
where our common vulnerabilities lead us to look after those in need, where we
tend this fragile garden we inhabit with care and devotion, knowing that our lives
and the lives of everything we love depend upon it.

Some might say this approach is naïve.
There are, as I’ll be the first to acknowledge, different strategies out there.
But, I’m not convinced any of them are working particularly well.

I find myself wondering what it might mean
to draw more people into the circle of our shared vulnerability.

To invite them to look and see life’s hard and harshest facts
and have reflected back to them their own fragility
and the summons to their fullest and highest humanity.

There are, of course, many people already committed to this path,
activists and non-activists alike.

Ordinary people sitting with the extraordinary challenges that we face
and seeking a way to move the hearts and minds of those around them.

A couple of weeks ago, I happened to hear Ursula Franklin on the CBC.

For those not familiar with her, she’s a remarkable woman worth knowing.

She’s a brilliant scientist, a committed feminist, and an ardent pacifist.
At 93, she’s still filled with hope that we can build a better world.

But hers is not a naïve hope. It was forged in the forced labour camp
she endured as a young woman during the Second World War
and refined through engaging the struggles
she’s faced over the many years of her long life.

As a Quaker living here in Toronto,
she revived a practice used among American Quakers
during the middle of the 19th century
as they grappled with their views on slavery.

The practice, called Scrupling, involves listening with deep intention
to ourselves, to each other, and to that greater voice some call divine.

A scruple, of course, is a doubt or hesitation
about the morality of some course of action.

To Scruple is to sit with those doubts
and wrestle with what they have to say to us.

A couple of years ago, Dr. Franklin guided us,
with the help of a team of committed volunteers from First,
to organize two Scrupling sessions here at First,
one with Members of the House of Commons and the Senate,
and the other with several Toronto City Councillors.

These were powerful, thoughtful, and thought-filled conversations with
our civic and federal leaders about the city and country we long to live in.

They were circles of vulnerability in which people shared
both the despair and the hope that fills their hearts.

Dr. Franklin in her CBC interview encouraged more communities to take up this
Quaker practice, so I find myself hoping that we might commit to doing more
scrupling around here in the coming months and years.

Like the Quakers facing questions about slavery,
we are facing an array of important and pressing problems
that have questions of morality and values at their heart.

When we undertook Scrupling a couple of years ago, I was concerned
that we hadn't really grasped the part that the Quakers do so well—
of listening deeply.

I often joke that Unitarians are a lot like Quakers who can't stop talking.

But over the past couple of years as so many of us have participated in Theme
Groups, it feels like we're, well, learning something from the Quakers.

In the coming months, I'm envisioning Scrupling sessions here

on topics like war and peace, our relationship to our Aboriginal neighbours, violence in our culture, gender identity and expression, poverty, and climate change. The list could go on, and it surely will.

If you want to help make this happen, let me know.

What I hope will emerge from these conversations is a greater clarity and a deeper commitment for us as a congregation.

As Margaret Wheatley put it, “There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.”

To be honest, we struggle to be effective collectively in addressing issues of social justice.

Part of that is because we hold differing views and are dedicated to a wide range of causes.

I don’t know that we’d ever find consensus, but I hope we might find deeper conviction and a clearer direction, at least individually, if not together.

My hope, though, would be for us to find more ways to work together.

I’ll close with words from the poet Marge Piercy, who speaks of what more we can accomplish when we chose not to work alone.

Alone, you can fight, you can refuse,
you can take what revenge you can but they roll over you.

But two people fighting back to back can cut through a mob,
a snake-dancing file can break a cordon,
[but] an army can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other sane, can give support,
conviction, love, massage, hope, sex.

Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.

With four you can play bridge and start an organization.

With six you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again and they said no,
it starts when you say We and know you who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.

May that be true for us.

May we say “We,” and always mean one more—
one more person drawn into the circle,
into the conversation,
into our covenant,
into our shared humanity,
and into our common dreams.

Amen.