

## **Human Odor and No Air Freshener**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

03 March 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 7:36-50

*“Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’”*

~ Luke 7:40

### **Prayer**

**We gather in your Presence, O God,  
To hear words that can touch our hearts,  
nurture our faith and inspire us to be more faithful followers of Christ.  
By your grace,  
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts,  
Bring us all closer to you and one another. Amen.**

Last Thursday, I came down with a severe case of the spiritual flu. The symptoms were all there: emotional fatigue, a weakened immunity against hopelessness, a deep discomfort in my chest at the state of our national affairs, a poor appetite for prayer, trouble concentrating on the discipline of sermon writing, a febrile reaction to the horrendous massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, and a feeling of soul-malaise that makes God seem distant and the Christian mandate to love and do good very difficult to swallow.

There are times when the complexities and contradictions of human life, of our own lives, collide with our faith and we are plunged into a bewildering state of spiritual turmoil. We become more acutely aware of the vast wilderness of the real world in which we live. The wilderness where a growing number of children arriving at the European hospital in Gaza – wounded, in pain, and traumatized by Israeli violence – are admitted under the acronym WCNSF: wounded children, no surviving family.<sup>1</sup> In this unforgiving wilderness, Israeli civilians are setting up bouncy castles in the stretch of land in the Gaza strip that is now controlled by the Israeli military to block the delivery of humanitarian aid to starving, diseased, wounded and trapped Gazans.<sup>2</sup> This is a wilderness where bitterness toward immigrants and asylum seekers is pushing politics at home and abroad toward scapegoating immigrants for the increase of violent crimes and dehumanizing the stranger for political expediency. This is a wilderness where the wild beasts of economic interests attack and devour any multilateral agreement that might help humankind slow down the climate crisis at our doorstep.

And there are demons in this inhospitable space we all inhabit with such ease. They tempt the Church to practice a spirituality of navel-gazing. They make people of

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faith feel deeply uncomfortable with the overwhelming reality of suffering, injustice, destruction, loss and death that swirls around the Church and they offer us a personal faith that works as an anesthetic. This personal, navel-gazing faith numbs us to the brokenness and real needs of the world. The words of Christ become a religious analgesic that provides temporary relief from the troubles in our own lives without ever asking us to wrestle with and drive out the negative forces we encounter in the wilderness.

Last Thursday, the scene of a boy in Gaza gingerly filling his jacket pockets with flour that had spilled onto the dirt after a chaotic and for many fatal distribution of humanitarian aid made me question whether I have allowed the faith that inspired me to join the Church and go into the ministry to become a spiritual escape from the world, a bubble of feel-good religious bromide in the vast wilderness of history.

T. S. Eliot was dead right when he wrote in his poem *“Four Quartets”* that **“Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”**<sup>3</sup> The footage of that starving boy grabbing flour off the ground sent me into a swirling vortex of emotions and theological questions that, honestly, I would rather not try to answer. The boy’s hunger and fear were a glaring antipode to my long-held conviction that if I keep delivering the Good News about Jesus’ teachings in weekly installments, if I keep challenging all of us to give up our navel-gazing “churchianity,” if I keep trying to practice a faith that is capable of holding the contradictions of human life – the grief and joy, the pain and laughter, the wound and the scar, the hate and love, the violence and the kindness – somehow we will prevent human history, our reality, from drifting into greater moral, ethical and spiritual darkness. Last Thursday though, it felt almost naïve to believe that a handful of sermons, the Easter hope at the core of our faith, the love that Christ embodied and commanded us to have for one another, even for our enemies, might do anything to save the life and the world of that boy with the pockets filled with flour mixed with dirt.

As Barbara Brown Taylor said before she left the ministry to become a college professor, our faith is grounded in a bunch of stories, words, and offering this faith, the Gospel, to a sick and broken world seems as futile as putting an aspirin in the hand of someone who is dying.<sup>4</sup> Most days, this faith of ours does not appear to bring much positive change to the wilderness, but these stories about hope, love, forgiveness and new life is all we have and, no matter what, we must keep sharing these stories with each other and with humankind because these holy stories can make the saving love of God revealed in Jesus real. These stories still have the power to change us and move the world a little closer to the values of God’s Kingdom where everyone eats their daily bread and debts and sins are forgiven, if we dare to stop navel-gazing and start acting out more boldly, more intentionally, more visibly what we believe.

This is what Jesus did in today’s Gospel lesson. When his host and guests bristled at the unusual, borderline indecent interaction between him and the woman who crashed the dinner party, Jesus noticed people’s surprise, shock, and indignation and

he spoke up – “**Simon,**” he said, “***I have something to say to you.***” Then Jesus used that very awkward moment at the dinner table to teach a lesson that if the whole Church on every corner of the world put into action, today’s wilderness would be a more hopeful place like a seed bursting with the potential for new life. Jesus challenged Simon and the other guests to look past the stereotypes, the labels and the messiness of the woman’s life and he invited them to be forgiving and to see the true and beautiful humanity of the woman who sneaked into a dinner party without a proper invitation, disregarded all the social conventions and transgressed all religious rules to find a better life.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel was named a “***Messenger to Humankind***” by the Nobel Prize Committee. In 1986, on the occasion of his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize Wiesel gave an eloquent speech in which he said: “***I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.***”<sup>5</sup>

At Simon’s dinner table, Jesus made the woman of questionable reputation who was known in town as a sinner the center of the universe. Her suffering and humiliation became his business. He took her side at the table. He forgave her before she asked to be forgiven. He told the woman in whom no one had faith that her faith had made her whole. Jesus showed the Church that would gather in his name that when we speak up in the name of human dignity, when we take a stand to protect human life, when the Gospel empowers us to make people who are suffering, being starved to death, enduring injustice and humiliation, dying because they happen to live in a certain part of the world the center of our universe, the stories of our faith take on human flesh, our flesh, and they leap out of the pages of Scriptures and change the course of human history through you and me. That’s the only way God’s saving grace becomes true, through your life!

But here is the catch: to make another human being the center of the universe, to side with them, to claim their suffering, messy and complicated lives as our business, Christians like you and me have to have the stomach for the hard and harsh reality of human life in the wilderness humanity has collectively shaped. Our faith has to be deep and wide enough to embrace painful stories, wounded souls, and scarred bodies.

There is a delightful British film entitled “The Lady in the Van” that tells the mostly true story about the odd relationship between playwright Alan Bennett and Miss Shepherd, a homeless and mentally ill woman whom Bennett describes as an “*odoriferous concerto*.” They meet by pure chance in a *nouveau-riche* neighborhood in

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North London in the 1970's. Alan Bennett falls under Miss Shepherd's sway and ends up inviting her to park her van on his driveway temporarily. She stays for 15 years.

Their unlikely friendship was not devoid of ambivalent feelings. At times, Alan Bennett saw Miss Shepherd as nothing more than a problem he had brought into his otherwise quiet life. Other times, she was a mystery – a woman who spoke perfect French and played the piano but who could also be in his own words, a “**bigoted, blinkered, cantankerous, unforgiving, self-serving, rank, rude, car-mad cow.**” Despite all these clashing sentiments, Bennett was able to look deep into Miss Shepherd and see the fragile human being inside and, rather than giving up on her, he befriends her, offers her space in his life, shows her genuine compassion, and makes her part of his universe until the day Miss Shepherd passes away in her sleep in the back of her van. Alan Bennett may have never realized it, but he was a disciple of Christ in the flesh, loving Miss Shepherd in his own way, welcoming her into his life and standing in solidarity with her despite her malodorous mess that spilled out of her van onto his driveway and into his life.

In a humorous scene in the film, Miss Shepherd is at confession; it is evident that she has been there many times before. When she steps out of the confession booth, she leaves behind the fetid smell of human waste. Another parishioner follows her into the confessional but recoils from the overpowering odor and the priest quickly says, “***There's an air freshener behind the Virgin.***”

It was this scene that made me think of the title for this morning's sermon: “*Human Odor and No Air Freshener.*”

As people of faith, we have a choice: we can pull back from the overpowering and repulsive redolence of human life in the wilderness and keep practicing an analgesic religion of navel-gazing inside our church buildings or we can face the odoriferous and gross reality of life with no air freshener, but with the strong faith that God's love can help us make the Gospel imperative to love and do good real through our voices, our actions, our presence, our willingness to take sides, to interfere, to speak up, to tell the world that we have something to say that can take humankind out of the wilderness to the land of healing and new life. And to be the church that can stomach the stench of humanity, we have to know in our very bones, as Jesus did, that our lives no longer belong to us alone, they belong to all those who need us and reek of the complicated and complex messiness of human life in our ailing world.

And in case you may be wondering, I am still not fully recovered from the spiritual flu, but thanks be to God for Christ's table today. There is nourishment here for the journey. There is bread and cup that can make us strong in faith. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> By Ruwaida Amer and Federica Marsi in ‘He was nameless’: Orphaned children lose family, identity in Gaza, AlJazeera, 15 February 2024 [<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/15/he-was-nameless-orphaned-children-lose-family-identity-in-gaza>].

<sup>2</sup> Politics with Ryan Grim in WCNSF – the most haunting acronym the world has produced, The Intercept, 02 March 2024 [<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#inbox/FMfcgzGxRxFjQrbwcQDbjBrKWCXnDVKq>].

<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot in Collected Poems 1909-1962, Four Quartets, Burnt Norton, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor in Gospel Medicine, p. xi and 8 [adapted].

<sup>5</sup> Elie Wiesel in Acceptance Speech, *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 10 Jun 2016. [[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance_en.html)].