

‘All God’s People’
Stouffville United Church
D Min Sermon #3, Year 1
Sunday, January 14th, 2018

Matthew 26:26-30

Last Thursday, in a immigration meeting with lawmakers, U.S. President Trump, using vulgar language, questioned why the United States should accept more immigrants from Haiti and Africa rather than from places such as Norway.

On Friday, Former Governor General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean, sharply criticized Trump for the racist remarks. Michaëlle Jean was born in Haiti. In a statement to The Canadian Press, she said, "It is such an insult before humanity."¹

In December, our local Member of Parliament, the Honourable Jane Philpott wrote a post about her conversations this past Fall with youth in our community.² And you know what they talked about? Racism – specifically the racial slurs and discrimination that youth experience today in Stouffville. Jane Philpott is holding a Town Hall meeting in 2018 and the question being asked at that event will be: ‘What does discrimination look like in Markham-Stouffville and what can we do about it.’

On Friday, in Scarborough, 11 year old Khawlah Noman was attacked by a man who was trying to cut off her hijab with a pair of scissors as she walked to school with her younger brother.

It seems every where we turn, or every news article that comes our way, has a story about racism, or a story about inequality, or a story about who’s in and who’s out determined by the dominant voice in the community.

There is just so much inequality in this world. Where can we go to find a place that is truly based on equality?

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus sat at the table with his disciples. And he “took a loaf of bread, [*take the loaf*], and after blessing it he broke it, [*break it*] gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”

“Then he took a cup [*pick up cup*], and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Do this in remembrance of me.

These are the words that form the heart of our communion liturgy. When we gather here at Stouffville United Church and share in this cup and this bread, we remember the words that

¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/trumps-remarks-on-african-countries-haiti-insulting-michaelle-jean/article37592870/>

² <http://www.stouffville.com/strength-in-diversity-jane-philpott/>

Jesus gave to his disciples, to us, to remember him. And we say in response, Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

So when Jesus broke that bread and shared that cup that night, what was he doing? He was giving the disciples, his friends, words to go into the world with, words to encourage, words to lead, words to bring hope in times of misery, and abandonment. For he knew his death was hours away and they would be lost without him.

200 years after Jesus shared this meal with his disciples, Cyprian was made a bishop in the early Christian Church, and I reflect on his words about this Last Supper. He wrote, “As many grains, collected and ground, and mixed together into one mass, make one bread, so in Christ, who is the heavenly bread, we may know that there is one body, with which our number is joined and united.”³

1700 years later, in 1982, the World Council of Churches gathered in Lima, Peru, to reach a consensus between churches on the theology and wording around the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist or Communion as we say in the United Church of Canada:

“The sharing of the cup and bread in a given place and time demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with fellow sharers in all times and places. It is in the eucharist that the community of God’s people is manifest.”⁴

And today, here, now, though we are many, we are one, because we share in the one loaf and the one cup. *We are all one at God’s table.*

There was a very famous spiritual writer in Canada called Henri Nouwen. Henri came to Canada in 1986 to become pastor to the L’Arche Daybreak Community on Yonge Street in Richmond Hill, Ontario, which is only twenty minutes from Stouffville. L’Arche is an international movement of communities that welcome people with disabilities. The L’Arche movement was founded by Canadian Jean Vanier.

And in this community where Henri lived and worked, there are no voices of entitlement. There is no inequality based on the colour of your skin, or what you wear, or your economic status or your gender or your sexuality. In this community, all are God’s people and all are loved and all are equally part of the community.

Human beings desire to belong - to belong to a community that values them, loves them, respects them, cares for them. But in reality, there is brokenness and inequality, oppression and violence that we find everywhere we look - in every country, in every city, and even in our families.

Nouwen wrote, “We keep looking somewhere *else* for that experience of belonging. We look at the splendor of nature, the excitement of history, and the attractiveness of people, but that

³ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 242.

⁴ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Faith and Order Paper No. 111*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 14.

simple breaking of the bread, so ordinary and unspectacular, seems such an unlikely place to find the communion for which we yearn.”⁵

Communion is celebrated in big cathedrals and small churches, in prison cells and even on cottage docks. It happens with clergy wearing vestments and lifting silver chalices or people sitting in a park with paper cups and a doughnut.⁶

It is both a public act and a personal experience at the same time.

When we share the cup and the bread around the table, we are ushered into the Kingdom where “we no longer belong to the world that keeps dividing, judging, separating, and evaluating.”⁷ Whenever the bread is taken, blessed, broken and given, it is the same event, connecting us to multitudes with whom we share a common story. *We are all one at God’s table.*

Leonardo da Vinci painted the Last Supper in 1498. Walk into almost any church and you will find “The Last Supper” on some wall. Stouffville United’s ‘Last Supper’ painting is in the Friendship Room, over the piano.

The original was painted on the walls of a convent dining-room in Milan, Italy. An art historian helps us understand the painting in its setting. They wrote: “It is said to be an exact copy of the table, linen, and dishes used by the monks. Seated at their meal, the brothers of the monastery could look upon the table of Christ as if He were their guest.”⁸

In the Da Vinci Last Supper, Christ sits in the center, the disciples grouped in threes about him. His face looks down at the table, an air of sadness and pensiveness about him as he struggles with what will come. Judas, the one who will betray him, holds a bag of coins in one hand.

A second very different take on ‘The Last Supper’ called, “The Light of Conscience”, by Brazilian artist Jorge Alexandre Rodriguez, shocks us in comparison to the well known da Vinci Last Supper.

Painted in 1999, Jesus sits alone at the table. The mood is apprehensive, unsettled, as he seems to sit, waiting, hoping that someone will join him. Is it a sign of our times, that we are too busy to notice him sitting there?

Take, eat. These words are ingrained upon my heart. *This is my body, broken for you.* These are words that meet a place deep within me. *Take, drink, remember me.* These words encounter a part of me that I can’t explain, and no one else can see, but God.

⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 120-121. I have paraphrased Nouwen’s much more detailed description of how and where the Eucharist is celebrated around the world.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸ Cynthia Pearl Maus, *Christ and the Fine Arts*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), 290.

In a recent conversation with my D Min Support Group at this church, reflections were shared on the experience of communion:

“It is ageless. It is togetherness. It embraces all.

“We’re all on a different path but we recognize that there’s something about that guy there, and we connect.”

You feel like you belong. This is right where you need to be.”

Take. Bless. Break. Give.

And when *you* receive the bread and the wine, what do you feel? Renewal? Hope? Loved?

Such a moment offers us hope of a ‘*world we can live into*’⁹, a world where God is constantly creating community for all.

Two disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus. They were joined by a stranger who didn’t seem to have heard anything about the events of that day – that Jesus had died and had been buried in a tomb. And when the women went to the tomb, they had been met by angels who said that Jesus was alive.

The two men invited the stranger to stay with them and share a meal. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” (Luke 24:30-31)

In the breaking of the bread,
 Jesus stood before them.
 And as we now break bread together,
 may our eyes be opened
 and may we recognize him.

Amen.

⁹ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 119