

2023.04.30 Sermon

4th Sunday of Easter

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At seminary my New Testament class was at the Jesuit school and our teacher was a Quebecois – Jean Paul Racine. He and I soon formed a bond cause there we were – Canadians surrounded by US-ers. Often our first interaction when I entered the classroom would go something like this “Allo, Gyllian!” “Allo, M’sieur!”. On certain occasions there was a further ritual - after the ‘Allo’s’ would come the “Guess what!” “What?” So on the day my sports-minded buddies informed me right before class that the Canadian women’s hockey team had just won the gold it was, “Allo, M’sieur! Guess what!” The response was the satisfying “Allo Gyllian – what?!” “The Canadian women won the gold!” Of course, he was Canadian so I didn’t have to explain. There was just the celebratory noises we shared.

Then one day I came into the classroom and it “Allo, Gyllian! Guess what!” “Allo, M’sieur! What?!” And he replied, “The pope has canonized Marie de l’Incarnation!” I responded, “That’s great! Who is she?” Ahhh – then came the explanation that she was a French-Canadian Ursuline sister from the 17th century who was also an educator. “And...”, he said, “there’s an NFB film all about her and you could watch it!” I was honoured he would give me this extra info BUT... “Sadly,” I said, “I don’t think my French is good enough to follow a movie plot.” He looked perplexed – “But surely you know all NFB films have subtitles in the other language, English if the film is in French, and French if the film is in English.” Well, actually I didn’t know that – did you? But I did know the films were free and anyone can go online and access them. Not totally ignorant – Phew! And then he said “And... her role is played by Marie Tifo!” And since I didn’t want to admit any further ignorance I replied “That’s great!” and went and sat down. Marie Tifo? Who the heck is that? I’ll tell you - one of the most popular and respected actresses in French-Speaking Canada, that’s who! Got it? Marie Tifo.

And who was Marie de l’Incarnation? Well – today is her day in our church. She was an Ursuline sister who was deputized by the King of France to come over to ‘New France’ in 1639 to ‘build a house for Jesus and for Mary’. Our own Anglican reference, For All the Saints, says, ‘Over the next thirty years she fulfilled this task by setting up a school for young women of all races, and by establishing the first self-governing congregation of nuns in Canada. Marie possessed many practical talents, and they were put to the test many times — when the Iroquois war reached the very walls of her convent; when the convent itself was completely destroyed by fire; when merchants tried to cheat her; and when the first bishop in New France (that would be Cardinal Richelieu, a worthy adversary indeed!) tried to tell her that he knew better than she did what was best for nuns living in the wilderness. Marie prevailed. In all these trials Marie displayed courage, intelligence, an unshakable sense of divine purpose, and even a sense of humour.

She noticed how indigenous children loved to sing and dance so she incorporated song and dance into her lessons for them – which is why she is now the patron saint of music educators. She translated the prayer book into five different indigenous languages. She did amazing things. She was faithful and hardworking and ingenious. Strong and intelligent and utterly committed to her call. And yet... at the same time, she was colonizing the indigenous people. She was not asking them about their faith and working to understand it. She was not offering her faith as

another path to the same Creator. She served with the belief that her way was the best way. The only way to God.

We hear that in this morning's readings as well – the only way to God is through Jesus. And yet... in our time don't we believe it's important, if not crucial, to respect other people's faith practices? Don't many of us understand that the God worshipped by Christians is the same God worshipped by Jews? And don't we believe that Buddhists (who do not believe in a God per se) and Hindus (who have many Gods) have religions that we wish to respect? And don't Muslims worship the same Abrahamic-rooted God that we do? So what are we to do with this demand that we believe the only way to God is through Jesus? Especially when we know terrible things have been done in the name of Jesus being the one true God. I don't have to name them; we all know them. Can we even for a minute imagine Jesus wanting us to reject anyone who lives a life grounded in love and compassion for others, who walks humbly and loves mercy and justice but does not follow Jesus? Jesus, the one who turned the world upside down, rejected the traditions of who was in and who was out in his day, had a circle of friends that included those seen as pariahs... wouldn't he want us to love whoever lives a good life? And whoever is struggling to live a good life? And whoever crosses our path no matter how well or poorly they are doing in their life?

If Jesus is the gate what does that mean for us? Over the centuries there's been many who claimed the job of gate-keeper seemingly with their main goal to be keeping others out. Whoever they decided were unworthy, sinful, different... they should be kept out. And yet... we know Jesus was all about bringing in those who had traditionally been excluded. Who do we exclude? And who do we listen to? Who is a trustworthy shepherd in our times? Is it always a Christian? Not necessarily, right? So how are we to know who to trust? It reminds me of a poem by William Stafford, poet laureate of the US from 1975 to 1990.

Easter Morning by William Stafford
 Maybe someone comes to the door and says,
 "Repent," and you say, "Come on in," and it's
 Jesus. That's when all you ever did, or said,
 or even thought, suddenly wakes up again and
 sings out, "I'm still here," and you know it's true.
 You just shiver alive and are left standing
 there suddenly brought to account: saved.

Except, maybe that someone says, "I've got a deal
 for you." And you listen, because that's how
 you're trained – they told you, "Always hear both sides."
 So then the slick voice can sell you anything, even
 Hell, which is what you're getting by listening.
 Well, what should you do? I'd say always go to
 the door, yes, but keep the screen locked. Then,
 while you hold the Bible in one hand, lean forward
 and say carefully, "Jesus?"

Yes, these readings can be very confusing. And maybe that's a good thing. Maybe when we are full of questions – along with grounding ourselves in love, compassion, generosity and mercy, and dedicating our lives to the struggle for economic, social, and environmental justice – maybe our questions are a sign that we have a *living* faith. Maybe a curious mind and a questing heart is exactly how God dreams we will revel in this gift of being alive. I hope so! And thanks be to God!

Amen.