Pastor Alissa Bender

Hamilton Mennonite Church

July 14, 2019

**Snakes & Ladders**

**Grounded: Pride & Humility**

Luke 18:9-17; Genesis 1:26-27

 We are taking a dive into church history for the rest of this summer, by exploring and reflecting on the tradition of what have been called the 7 deadly sins and 7 holy virtues. These aren’t listed together anywhere in the Bible. The idea comes to us from the desert fathers, hermits and mystics of the early Christian church.

 The worship series we’re following is called Snakes & Ladders. You might remember those as actual images in the Bible… the snake who appears in Genesis as a deceiver, and the ladder that Jacob dreamed with angels going round and round between heaven and earth.

 More likely, you may have grown up playing the board game. I did not expect to learn this week that Snakes & Ladders originated from an ancient Indian board game that had a root in morality lessons within traditional Hindu philosophy. In fact, in the historic version of the game, there were fewer ladders than snakes “as a reminder that a path of good is much more difficult to tread than a path of sins”.

 Interestingly, according to Wikipedia, “when the game was brought to England, the Indian virtues and vices were replaced by English ones in hopes of better reflecting Victorian doctrines of morality. Squares of Fulfillment, Grace and Success were accessible by ladders of Thrift, Penitence and Industry and snakes of Indulgence, Disobedience and Indolence caused one to end up in Illness, Disgrace and Poverty.” The English version also evened up the number of ladders & snakes. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_and_Ladders>)

 It’s interesting to consider how notions of virtue and vice are culturally-rooted. In fact, remembering that connects very much to our first themes of pride & humility. When we start speaking of contrasting sins & virtues, it will be very tempting to start drawing straight lines down the middle of who is in the right and who is in the wrong, much like the Pharisee did in today’s parable.

In fact, the writers of this series suggested we re-order our services to include 2 shorter sermons rather than one, with one focussed on the deadly sin and one focussed on the holy virtue. But as a worship committee, we thought, life is usually messier than that. We hope to be more nuanced than that. These vices and virtues may teach us different things depending on our context.

For example, I thought it was a little bit funny to come back to my first sermon after being away and prepare to preach against pride when last month “pride” meant a celebration of all people being created in the image of God, no matter our sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, my friend surprised me with this custom-made button, “Pastor for Pride”, which I love, and which… seems to conflict with our theme today.

So, I got some help from Rev. Elizabeth Edman in her book, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ people know about life and love and how it can revitalize Christianity*. She writes,

“Colloquially the word ‘pride’ can refer to an excessive level of self-esteem that keeps people from engaging other people. It can also refer to a determined, isolating self-sufficiency: someone can be ‘too proud’ to receive assistance from someone else.” (p111) We see this definition of pride in the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. In fact, the gospel writer sets us up with a little morality lesson by writing that Jesus told this parable “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt”.

In other words, he could have told this in just about any group of people. Remember that to Jesus’ listeners, the Pharisee wouldn’t immediately have been understood to be the villain. We tend to read the New Testament with that lens now. But the Pharisee would be, to us, the faithful churchgoer who sings in the choir, sits on 2 committees, and gives to every refugee drive. Everything this Pharisee says is true – “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income”. Those are faithful biblical actions. But they lead him to separating himself from others. “Thank you that I am not like other people” (presumably who don’t live exactly like him).

Rev. Edman writes further, “Conventionally, pride can refer to the valuing of the self over and against the other. When defined this way, pride is a manifestation of a deeply imbalanced relationship between Self and Other. Calling people to account for harboring this kind of pride is one of the ways that Christianity pays attention to this imbalance, which in a way is a good thing. Aggressive, hubristic self-aggrandizement absolutely can and does come at God’s expense, resulting in a stubborn refusal to participate in God’s vision for humanity or even to recognize God’s transcendent power.” Edman writes, “hubristic pride makes relationship with Self, Other, and God nearly impossible”. (p113)

We see, in Luke, the imbalanced relationship between the Pharisee and the tax collector, and we see how it harms the Pharisee’s relationship with God, too. The Pharisee gives the appearance of praying to God, but he’s just reciting his many assets. He’s not listening to what God might be asking of him. And we’re told that it’s the tax collector, beating his breast in contrition, who goes home justified. Not the person who figured he was following all the letters of the law.

But we also get a hint through Jesus’ story that he doesn’t want the tax collector to remain far off, eyes lowered, beating himself up. That posture may be a heartfelt part of confession of sin, but it is not, in itself, the virtue. The final line of the story is, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” That sounds to me like an echo of Luke 1, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly”. Maybe sometimes we need that to mean a total reversal of where power lives, but maybe sometimes we need that humbling and exalting to bring us all back to the same common ground.

Edman refers to “healthy Pride” or as that which is celebrated in the month of June. She writes, “Pride is a statement of personal affirmation that extends out to others. Pride calls us together. In this way, Pride becomes a posture that makes ethical living possible” (112)… “queer Pride is all about a healthy relationship with Self, Other, and for many of us, transcendent reality” (113).

Edman also writes “We are talking about Pride that points to something deep inside you, something that is of immense value, something that connects you to other people and to God. As Christians, our fundamental identity – the thing we are supposed to know to our core – is that we belong to God.” (p118)

In our 7-day tale of creation, God said, “Let us make humankind in our image”. The One who is source and mystery and community, who somehow speaks in plural pronouns, they said, Let’s make humanity like us, reflecting our glory, bearing our responsibility for the earth, existing in community from the very beginning. And the way the 2nd version of the creation story is told, from the humus, God made a human. An earthling from the earth. Adam from adamah. It is as simple as that, and as miraculous as the breath of life that God breathed into those human nostrils, that filled the lungs and that breathed out in awe at all that God had created and given as a gift for God’s own beloved ones.

Since the words come from the same root, it may be helpful to think about humility as our humus-ness. Humanity’s createdness in the image of God from the very stuff of earth. The real, messy, tangible, beautiful, God-created stuff of earth. We are all God-created, and we are all God-beloved. That is the thing deep inside us that has immense value and that connects us to other people and to God. Rev. Edman calls it queer pride, you might call it humility, but whatever you call it, it pulls each and every one of us from literal common ground. And into our groundedness in creation, God breathes life.

“Those who humble themselves will be exalted”. I wanted us to keep reading into the story of Jesus welcoming the children, because I think that most kids haven’t yet forgotten how to live lives that are grounded in their belovedness, their creation in the image of God.

Children can teach us by the way they are fully themselves, fully human in ways that reach out to others. When a 6-year old declares to me that at camp this week he made a fire-biting python pokemon, and waits for my reaction, this is not pride in the sense of conceit or hubris. This is an affirmation of his participation in creation, and an invitation to me to see that it was good. This is freedom to *be* and to be loved and to be celebrated, not because his accomplishments are greater than his brother’s, but just because he is himself, created in the image of God.

If we were re-vamping the language of the 7 deadlies for our 21st century context, I wonder if another word to stand in for the virtue of humility, could be authenticity. So it’s not a call to hide who we are, to stand far off and lower our eyes and beat ourselves up. It’s a call to be grounded in who we are in our Creator who loves us. It’s a call to be all of ourselves, not less of ourselves.

The spiritual practice of humility allows me to believe that my story, my gifts, my experience, have value in the world. My living authentically out of who I am and not out of comparing myself to others is what the world needs. And that is what I need from my neighbours, in order to help me grow and to help the world flourish.

 If humility could also mean authentically being ourselves, we recognize our limits and the things we have yet to learn or unlearn. Humility can be entrusting ourselves to another person’s care, or wisdom, or strength, or creativity. We allow that as God works in us, God works in other people, and the wisdom of another may be exactly how God has chosen to lead us today.

In humility we remember that we are not always right, or, even if we are right, that might not be as important as our relationship with another person. With humility, we acknowledge our need for community. And when we admit that we need each other, we must be prepared to release our grip on our own certainty of how to do things, or what is right.

If we are all made of the stuff of earth, then my neighbour, no matter who they are, has something to teach me about God. That’s something that Elaine Heath said to the gathered assembly of Mennonite Church Canada 2 weekends ago. As she encouraged us to think creatively and to watch for the innovators who are re-imagining how to follow Jesus in ways that might not look like traditional Church, she encouraged our congregations to ask: “Where, in our communities, are people gathering around something That makes them feel connected? And That helps them do something good in the world? How can the gospel connect to that? (in a non-colonizing, non-violent, non-manipulative way)

My neighbour has something to teach me about God. But remember that humility, or authenticity or healthy pride, whichever term we want to claim, this doesn’t mean that we hide the gifts that we ourselves have to give.

Mennonites have long spurned pride as a favourite sin to avoid and judge in others, at least as far as “pride” was defined throughout history – zippers, buttons, chrome bumpers, my grandmother’s secret engagement ring – all somehow standing in for the sin of pridefulness.

When I told a couple of colleagues that I was preaching on pride & humility, they were interested in the conversation. One pastor said that she has often been curious about the line between self pride and Gospel sharing. The other added in agreement that she struggled to get people to “share about God's activity in their life […] because it was like bragging or pride. There's got to be a place for genuine testimony that is different than narcissism.” (Sara/Carrie)

We’ve internalized this message that humility means burying ourselves, rather than grounding ourselves in being created and loved by God. Rev Edman also has a word for this. She writes, “healthy Pride should not be hidden under the bushel of faux meekness and humility. The cross has an “in-your-face” quality to it, which we Christians are supposed to own. The inherent scandal of the cross is a huge part of its power” (119). Edman challenges us as Christians to be able to show and tell people that “we aren’t afraid to be implicated in the scandal that God’s love essentially is” (120).

God’s love for the lost and least and tax collectors and Pharisees and all people in our infinite variety is a scandal. The creator of the cosmos became a helpless infant and lived a life that ended in capital punishment… until it began again, not on a battle field, but in a garden. God’s love is scandalously vulnerable, scandalously inclusive, and scandalously reflected in fallible humanity, participants that we are in how God is loving the world. How are we telling people about that?

I am very interested in hearing from all of you about what grounds you in being created and loved by God, and recognizing your neighbours as created and loved by God, and how that groundedness can call us to live and speak authentically… not with conceit and not with shame, but with a confidence in the image of God reflected in us and reflecting back to us from each beloved child of God we meet.

Let’s have a moment of silent prayer before we sing together, and then I invite any reflections in our time of joys & concerns.

God of love, we ground ourselves in you…

…

…

God of love, we seek to bear fruit in you.

Amen.