

SERMON: “Reflecting Respect”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, October 31, 2021

PRAYER: “Reach us through the empowering wisdom of your Word, O God. Infuse us with the transforming power of your Spirit. Inspire and enliven us with the compassion and grace of Jesus, that we too might live into our own Christ-likeness. We pray in his name.” Amen

“Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us.” (Eph. 5:1-2)
That’s the whole point of living a life of faith centred in Jesus, isn’t it? Would that it were easy. Oodles of God’s children have suffered rejection, abuse, disregard, harassment, and shame. Sometimes, it has been other children of God who have dished it out. And, in numerous ways, social disregard, stereotyping, and inhumanity is built into systems. Not God’s idea of right relationships among human beings “made in God’s image”. Not the healing, healthful, mutually supportive God-centred form of living modelled among us, commended, and evoked by Jesus.
“Be imitators of God, and live in love.” Hmmm.

Just a few months into the new call and an old guard circle of congregational trustees took a disliking to the new minister. He wasn’t perfect, but he wasn’t as awful as they made him out to be. Back-burner tension simmered for two and half years. Then, the old guard had rounded up some of the current lay leadership to share their discontent. Forty people met secretly off-site, unofficially, compiled a long list of their concerns. A letter with only five signatures, not ten as required by church polity, was sent to the Secretary of the Board and the chair of Ministry and Personnel asking for a change in Pastoral Relations. The other 80% or so of the congregation was blind-sided along with the minister. The net result was an official review from the denominational governing body. The minister eventually moved on to another call. But the splintering wedge of congregational disharmony was already deeply embedded. Within a year of their minister’s departure, that congregation closed its church and amalgamated with another embattled congregation across the river on the opposite hill. You can guess how that turned out. Sadly, that’s only one of many tales that can be told of failures to love, of conflict and disharmony that mushroomed into irreconcilable differences, of many a wounded, bruised, and dis-spirited soul. And, in a church, or synagogue, or mosque, or temple! That’s like super sad.

Sad enough, troublesome enough when it happens in inter-personal relationships. True, sometimes separation and divorce proves to be the healing path that’s needful. And sometimes, though it may take years, the distancing is overcome, restoration happens.

There's that poignant moment in the Broadway musical "Kinky Boots", where Lola, a transvestite confers with Charlie, the not-so-happy-to-have-inherited-his-father's-shoe-factory-business in the country, about the possibilities of making a different kind of footwear. They met because Charlie had rescued Lola from being beaten by bullies outside a bar. In the process of their negotiating, Lola reveals his? or should it be her? (pronoun yet unclear) back story that has parallels with Charlie's: about not having their father's love or respect because their lives took a path other than the one their dads hoped for and sought to encourage.

Lola (birth name: Simon) sings:

*When I was just a kid everything I did, was to be like him under my skin
My father always thought, if I was strong and fought not like some albatross,
I'd begin to fit in.*

*Look at me powerless and holding my breath,
trying hard to repress what scared him to death.
It was not that easy to be his type of man to breathe freely was not in his plan;
and the best part of me is what he wouldn't see*

*I'm not my father's son. I'm not the image of what he dreamed of
with the strength of Sparta and the patience of Job.
Still couldn't be the one to echo what he'd done and mirror what was not in me." I*

By the end of that song, Charlie joins Lola in singing the refrain. By the end of the musical, both Lola and Charlie have found a good measure of reconciliation with the fathers. The long-sought for and not offered respect falls into place.

Respect. It's been suggested as one of the core values resident in this congregation.

It's certainly a core value for God.

You can hear it called for clearly in behind another list of "thou-shalt-nots" other than the Ten Commandments, that are found in Leviticus, chapter 19, which is known among Hebrew and Christian Bible scholars as "the Holiness Code".

Consider this sample from 19:13 and following:

"You shall not defraud your neighbour.

You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.

You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.

You shall not render an unjust judgment...with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people....

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin....

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people."

The list then closes on a positive note of incentive:

"...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am your God." (verse 18)

Fairness and justice in relationships is about mutual support, mutual sharing, mutual respect.

Jacob Cohen was born into a Jewish family in a small village on Long Island.

His father had a life on the stage and was seldom at home. His mother, Dorothy, was, well, cold. She never kissed, hugged, or offered Jacob any signs of affection.

When Dad abandoned the family, Dorothy moved herself, Jacob and his sister to Queen's NY. Life was a struggle. Jacob helped with family support selling newspapers, ice cream at the beach, and delivering groceries.

Before the move from Long Island into the city, Jacob was molested by a neighbour who paid him a nickel to let him kiss Jacob for five minutes.

By age 15, Jacob made some money writing comedy bits for some stand-up comedians.

At age 19, he left home to test his own wings in the entertainment world, changing his name to Jack Roy. It didn't go well. He got work as a singing waiter, but got fired. On reflection he would say, "at the time I quit and gave up show business, I was the only one who knew I quit."

He was married with family by then and took a job selling aluminum siding. Still working at that, he tried to revive his comedy career in his early 40s, without much luck. Something was missing. He began to work on a character or persona that would be his own. He borrowed a name from a phony cowboy invented by Jack Benny for his early radio shows. He got a substitute gig for a cancelled act on the Ed Sullivan show in March 1968. He was a hit and his career was launched.

In addition to stints in Las Vegas and several other TV appearances, he opened his own comedy club in New York.

His marriage however would pass through divorce, remarriage, and then a second divorce. He would eventually re-marry happily 25 years or so later.

Joan would describe him as "classy, gentlemanly, sensitive, and intelligent". That wasn't always apparent in his comedy schticks in his adopted persona.

Ill health would catch up with him in the early 2000s: a heart attack, then brain surgery to increase blood flow, then a heart-valve replacement from which he would not fully recover dying six weeks after surgery.

He was buried in a cemetery in Los Angeles. His epitaph is "There Goes the Neighborhood". For some of you, perhaps, that's a clue.

His comedy was primarily self-deprecating, often very funny, and also at times because it has been part of the business rude, sexist, even insulting. *1*

It was Jack Benny who gave Jacob Cohen turned Jack Roy a big green light. He was brought into a TV interview and what he said to Jack was:

"I'm cheap and I'm 39, that's my image, but your 'no respect' thing, that's into the soul of everybody. Everybody can identify with that. Everyone gets cut off in traffic, everyone gets stood up by a girl, kids are rude to them, whatever." *2*

He says to me, 'Every day something happens where people feel they didn't get respect.'

Now you likely know, Jack Roy, was better known to us as Rodney Dangerfield. He may not get our universal approval or total popular acclaim, but from numbers of his peers in the business, and millions of fans, along with a other awards and honours, he got the one thing he craved the most: respect. When we know some of the back story, perhaps our image of him also has some glow on it.

Centuries after the Holiness Code was given and later recorded and published, Paul the apostle, or one of his proteges, penned a letter to Ephesian congregations that also resonates with inducements to embed respect into our being and behaving:

*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours....,
Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger
Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands,
so as to have something to share with the needy.
Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up
so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander,
together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven.
Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love ...” (Eph. 4:23-5:2)*

Born into an already blended family in Memphis, Tennessee, Ree’s minister father moved the family to Buffalo soon after and then took a church position in Detroit when she was 5. A year later her mother and father separated and she remained with her father. Her mother died the year Ree turned 10 and a grandmother and Mahalia Jackson who was a family friend helped take care of her and her siblings. Around that time, Ree also learned to play piano by ear. She would become part of the singing group that toured with her father’s gospel caravan and would be a feature soloist on a few gospel albums. Her celebrity father attracted house guests and friends such as Sam Cooke and Martin Luther King Jr. At age 16 she would join the civil rights movement and tour with Martin Luther King Jr. At age 18, she told her father she wanted to develop a singing career and follow SamCooke. They moved to New York. Her father began being her manager. She was contracted by Columbia Records but her early releases didn’t fare all that well. Jerry Wexler, her producer, believed in her potential as a rhythm and blues and soul singer and convinced her to take on a contract with Atlantic Records. In February, 1967, she had a hit on both the R&B and Billboard 100 music charts. In April of 1967, she released her version of an original song by Otis Redding that would become not only one of her signature hits but an early human rights anthem as well. She jazzed up that Otis Redding song, added a borrowed saxophone solo bridge part, and along with her sister Carolyn, introduced several other variations that made it pop. In her version of the song, she’s also one who has money to contribute her partner’s life. She’s the one who asks her man to give her her “probers”. The “ree, ree, ree, ree, ree” chant in between some line is an echo of her abbreviated name. Her full name, you may now have guessed, was Aretha, Aretha Franklin. Otis was okay with the fact that “that girl stole my song, and it’s hers now.” R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me. Women and civil rights activists and other supporters throughout America and the world embraced her version, adopted it as one of their anthems. 3 R-E-S-P-E-C-T, take care, TCB (That is, Take Care of Business).

It's about mutuality in relationships, valuing people as persons, for their own gifts and abilities, not counting external features against them like being a woman or having dark skin.

It indeed goes to the core of all of our souls. Everyone can identify with that.

Sometime today or later this week, I invite us all to reflect on that:

Where have we experienced and shared respect in our own family, friendship circles?

Where has it been experienced here at First United?

And when it hasn't been, what do we need now to help us overcome that?

"Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us." (Eph. 5:1-2)

Near the end of her revealing and insightful study of systems of embedded privilege, American journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson offer these words of hope and encouragement as each of us struggles with and discerns how to break free of the roles in life that became assigned to us because our genetic inheritance determines what we look like:

"It was up to each of us to accept or challenge the role we were cast into, to determine for ourselves and to make the world see that what is inside of us -- our beliefs and dreams, how we love and express that love, the things that we can actually control -- is more important than the outward traits we had no say in.

That we are not what we look like but what we do with what we have, what we make of what we are given, how we treat others and our planet....

None of us chose the circumstances of our birth.

We had nothing to do with having been born into privilege or under stigma.

We have everything to do with what we do with our God-given talents and how we treat others in our species from this day forward." 4

How we love and how we express that love is our endeavour to be "imitators of God".

Valuing respect in the core of our being, in the heart of our congregation, and actually living it out in our words and deeds and interactions -- that's one sure-fire way of reflecting that.

It can become our daily and hourly chart-topping song:

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, this is what it means to me.

Notes

1 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Dangerfield.

2 from <https://www.biography.com/news/rodney-dangerfield-i-don-t-get-no-respect>.

3 See internet entries re: *Respect, Aretha Franklin*.

4 Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, (Random House, New York, NY: 2020), page 387.

