

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

February 2, 2020

Good News for Groundhog Day

*God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. – 1 Corinthians 1:25-29*
Blessed are those who are poor in spirit; the kin-dom of heaven is theirs. – Matthew 5:1-12

Does anyone else like the movie “Groundhog Day”? You know the movie where every morning the Bill Murray character wakes up and has to relive the same day over and over again until he gets it right? He starts out as a self-absorbed asshole (pardon my language, but sometimes strong language is justified!). He despises his job, hates his life, hates the place he is, treats the people around him like crap, but as he lives the same day, over and over again, unable to escape whatever weird time loop he has fallen into, he starts to suffer, and his suffering gradually teaches him to be decent person, even to be capable of love.

That movie is one of my favorite movies, but in my humble opinion Groundhog Day itself is a bit of a downer. If it is a nice sunny day, that is bad news, because at this time of year, clear usually means cold, which is supposed to mean that there will be six more weeks of winter. And if it is a cloudy day, it is still a cloudy day! And does anyone really believe that even if the winter is short, it will be over in six weeks? I mean, really, that is only the middle of March! Maybe winter is really that short sometimes in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia or Punxatawny, Pennsylvania, or someplace else, but not here!

So really, today is a bad news day. It is winter, and the winters around here last too long, and there isn't a bloody thing we can do about it. So I think the United Church in Delburne has a great idea. They have a Groundhog Supper every year! That sounds fantastic to me. I've never actually eaten groundhog, but I bet they are delicious! So rather than pretend the Groundhog is capable of predicting the weather, I say, let's butcher the groundhog, cook it, eat it, and be done with the whole thing!

But maybe, just maybe, there might be some good news for Groundhog Day. Winter is on its way out! It might get to minus sixteen (?) tonight, with a windchill, but winter is on its way out. The days are getting longer! The sun rose this morning at fourteen minutes after eight, and will set at 5:23. That's a full nine hours, 8 minutes and forty-four seconds of sunlight, three minutes and 28 seconds longer than yesterday. That may not seem like much but that nine hours, eight minutes and forty four seconds of daylight is a full hour and nearly twenty-seven minutes longer than the winter solstice. Tomorrow the day will be three and a half minutes longer than today! And each day after that gets longer by three or four minutes more! Winter is on its way out! Slowly, inexorably, it is on its way out! It is just a matter of time.

Now if you love winter, if you've made winter your home, if you wish winter would last the whole year round, you may not be very happy about that. But for those of us who like spring, summer or maybe just a little variety, the fact that spring is coming is good news!

Jesus begins his sermon on the mount with a similar confidence. Injustice is on its way out! Cruelty does not get the final word! Violence is not the end of the story! For some people that may not be a good thing. If you love injustice, if you've made injustice your home, if you wish injustice would last forever, then you may not be very happy that it is on its way out. But for those of us who have not made our peace with the way the world is, who have mourned over suffering and longed for justice and worked for peace and lived a life of mercy, we are blessed, because our time is coming. We are Easter people and we are blessed because our time - the time of God's kingdom, God's justice and God's peace – that time is coming!

The opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount are familiar to many of us, and that familiarity may blur how strange and radical they are. Most of the time, when we think about those who are happy and blessed, we think of the wealthy, the beautiful, the successful. If we were to write our version of this passage, we might do it like this:

Blessed are the rich, for they have the money to do what they want.

Blessed are the slender, for they are admired and desired.

Blessed are the powerful, for they command respect.

Blessed are the tanned, for they have been someplace warm.

But when Jesus delivers his sermon from the mount, he points to a quite different group. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the persecuted are not the people we conventionally think of as happy and blessed. These are those we think of as vulnerable and fragile.

But Jesus is not saying it is a good thing to be poor, meek, in mourning, or persecuted; he is saying that the state of being vulnerable and fragile opens an opportunity. The blessed are blessed because they will be comforted, they will be satisfied, they will inherit the earth, they will see God, and they will receive the kingdom of God. Because they are broken, they are open to community, open to communion with the Creator and the Creation in ways that those who are satisfied and successful in their present lives are not.

I have come to appreciate this all the more during the times in life when I have been at my most vulnerable, when a girlfriend dumped me, when I was diagnosed with a chronic illness, when I was in hospital for surgery, when my parents died, when I felt least strong and least able to cope on my own. It was at those times when I was upheld by a strength that was not my own, by the support of my faith community, by my family and my friends, and by my faith in a God who shares those struggles with me. And it was at those times that I felt closest to what is really important in life.

In lots of ways I have been very successful in my life. I have three university degrees, hold a position of respect in the community, am reasonably good at what I do, perhaps even could be considered, to use Paul's words, strong and wise. But I'm not sure I was ever really sure that I was loved until I was weak and foolish. And it was those experiences of being weak and foolish that make life make sense. It is what we call **grace**, and life without it is bleak and barren. Life with it is amazing. Without that grace, even the most successful is dissatisfied. With grace, even the most destitute is at peace.

When I was seven, my family moved into a new house. It was so new it wasn't quite finished. After we moved in, a stone mason showed up to build the fireplace in the family room. He brought wheelbarrows full of round grey boulders around

to the back yard. If he is going to build a fireplace out of those grey boulders, I thought, it is going to be a really ugly fireplace. But the mason set to work on those boulders. He turned them over and over until he found a crack or a fissure, and then with a chisel, he worked away at the crack until he split the rock wide open, revealing the beauty of the stone within. Not only were the stones more attractive when they had been broken, but the mortar stuck to them more easily. They were more easily bonded to each other. In the same way, I have come to believe, when we are polished and successful, we are like those round grey boulders. I find it hard to feel close to people when I only know their blessings and accomplishments. It is when I know their struggles and brokenness that I feel we are really connected.

Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" has a few beautiful lines worth remembering: "Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in." There is a crack in everything. There is a crack in you, a crack in me. That crack is the way the mason's hammer exposes the beauty within. The crack is the way the light gets in. The crack is the way the grace gets exposed. So forget your perfect offering; it is through your cracks and imperfections that the light gets exposed.

The cross was the crack into which the divine mason inserted the divine chisel. And on Easter morning, the world was broken open, revealing a light and a beauty that continues to shine into the most difficult experiences of life, into the most hopeless places in the world. It is the light of grace that follows us every day. It is the beauty of a hope that can sustain us through illness and betrayal, through failure and through death, through the bleakest days of winter. "For God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong..." That is the good news for Groundhog Day, the message of the movie itself, that blessing comes to us on the darkest, cloudiest days of our fragility and failures, for it is then that we are really open to the coming of the sun/Son!