

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
February 18, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Genesis 9:8-17  
Mark 1:9-15**

**Sermon: The Broken-Open Heart (Lent 1)**

I want to share with you the story of a Serbian Orthodox bishop, Nikolai Velimirovich. He is a somewhat controversial figure in history – because, at times in the 1930's, he was a supporter of Germany's antisemitism. Later he became critical of their philosophy, when he came to see the real impact of Nazi Germany as it rolled so violently across eastern Europe. As an opponent of the Nazi regime, then, Bishop Nikolai was arrested and imprisoned by the Germans in 1941, and he was eventually transferred to the concentration camp at Dachau.

Being a Christian, he was not treated as poorly at Dachau, as were the many Jewish prisoners, he was not threatened with execution. As I understand his story, the worst agony arose from the bishop's belief that it was actually his own priests who had betrayed him; priests who held views supporting the Nazis, and who felt that, by decrying the violence of Jewish persecution, Bishop Nikolai was a traitor to true Christian orthodoxy.

As opposed as he was to the Nazi regime, then, Nikolai believed that his true enemies were much closer. While in prison, his anger against his former friends and colleagues ate away at his soul like burning acid. And Nikolai realized that this unresolved anger was standing between him and God. But how to forgive?

Among his writings there is a prayer that Bishop Nikolai wrote in Dachau – a prayer that strips away all pride.

*Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them. Enemies have driven me into your embrace more than friends have...*

*Enemies have made me a stranger in worldly realms and an extraneous inhabitant of the world. Just as a hunted animal finds safer shelter than an unhunted animal does, so have I, persecuted by enemies, found the safest sanctuary, having ensconced myself beneath your tabernacle, where neither friends nor enemies can slay my soul. Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them. Bless them and multiply them; multiply them and make them even more bitterly against me: so that my fleeing to You may have no return;...Enemies have taught me to know what hardly anyone knows, that a person has no enemies in the world except himself.*

Passionate, terrifying, awesome words. Bishop Nikolai presents us with a very human story, a very difficult story of facing up to a difficult truth. It is too easy to get caught up in the illusions of wealth and privilege and happiness. But when all that is lost, what we have left is the love of God. However humble, however mistaken, however misunderstood, we may be, we are left with the words of the Spirit "You are my beloved child."

This is the way of the broken-open heart. This is the way of the cross.

The season of Lent is traditionally a difficult time in the church. Tradition tells us it is a time of repentance, a time for shedding all that distracts us from our faith in God. In many Christian churches, we would not dare to have flowers in the sanctuary, or sing the word “Hallelujah”, or schedule a wedding or a baptism.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have, by and large, shifted away from many of those strict traditions. We have pushed back against the theology that we are like worms and only God is holy. That we are full of sin, and only God can redeem us. We have reclaimed theologies, like Celtic and indigenous spirituality, which proclaim that God’s light is already alive in each one of us, and in all creation.

But we too are often blocked by the kinds of angers and despair that Bishop Nikolai had to face up to in Dachau. And so, we too, need to break open our hearts, to name whatever it is that stands in the way of hearing the Spirit say to us “You are my beloved child.”

The season of Lent is our invitation to “imprison” or “lock down” our assumptions on our own happiness for a few weeks, and to dig deeper in our own souls for the Spirit’s perspective. To de-clutter our hearts and minds, and to reconnect with what really matters, with what really gives us hope.

Again, it is one of our traditions that the season of Lent begins with the story of Jesus’ temptation. But if you sneezed or blinked in the midst of that gospel reading today, you might have missed it.

The gospel of Mark brings a unique perspective to the story of Jesus’ temptation. In Luke and in Matthew there is the dramatic entrance of Satan, posing three difficult choices for Jesus – hunger or complacency, monetary wealth or spiritual wealth, power or humility. But in Mark, the confrontation between good and evil is only one verse long. The temptation sequence is book-ended by two stories expressing God’s love – “you are my beloved child” and the angels sent to care for him. God’s love, at the beginning and the end of all things, puts Jesus’ isolation and temptation in perspective.

Jesus’ heart / God’s heart, is broken open when there is nothing else to hide behind.

Brian McLaren, the author of the book we are using for our Lenten theme reflections this year, has written about the future of the Christian family, and the need to move from focussing on faith as a system of beliefs, and migrating into being a community that learns and teaches about putting love in action first. He writes (p. 184):

- You can’t learn to love people without being around actual people – including those who infuriate, exasperate, annoy, offend, frustrate, encroach upon, resist reject, and hurt you, thus tempting you not to love them.
- You can’t learn the patience that love requires without experiencing delay and disappointment.
- You can’t learn the kindness that love requires without rendering yourself vulnerable to unkindness.
- You can’t learn the generosity that love requires outside the presence of heart-breaking and unquenchable need.
- You can’t learn the humility that love requires without moment of acute humiliation.

If we imagine our hearts as hands – they don't work very well if we clench them hard like fists grasping at straws, trying to hold on for dear life. But if we approach life and the world around us with a hand that is open, sometimes even broken open, then we can hold so much more of the real abundance that God intends for us.

Jesus, the apostle Paul, the gospel of John, and the early martyrs of our faith, like St Valentine – all approached life with a broken-open heart, and perceived God at work in the world the better for it. Francis of Assisi, Columba of Iona, Julian of Norwich – all envisioned God because of their broken-open hearts, and carved their own paths through wilderness to express it. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero – their hearts were broken open to love across boundaries of race and religion and disability.

What is it that breaks your heart open? The sight of a loved one suffering? The goal that you realize you will never achieve? The justice that seems too far away to reach? We offer them to God when our heart breaks open. When our heart breaks open God sends the descending dove, the waiting angel, the word of peace. We realize that we are not alone.

During the season of Lent, we are challenged in our awareness of who we are in the world. The cross of Christ is not only an architectural feature on our building, or a piece of jewellery we may wear around our neck. That cross is a four dimensional sign post pointing us outward. That cross is a closed circle that has been cut apart and laid down. That cross is a clenched fist opening its palm to be vulnerable in the world. That cross is a symbol of what it will cost to heal not only our own wounds and angers and injustices, but the creation around us as well.

But we are not alone, thanks be to God. May we go from this place, out to many other places, and know that God is with us. May we go forward, may we go deeper, may we go lightly, knowing we are blessed and beloved. Let us go forth in Christ, Amen

References to Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich and Brian McLaren are taken from *The Great Spiritual Migration* (2016) by Brian McLaren, Convergent Books.