

the Rev. Karen Millard
Squamish United Church

August 22, 2010

Scripture Reading
Isaiah 58:9-14
Luke 13:10-17

Against the Window

This morning I want to begin with a story from a newsletter we as ministers receive from our Spiritual Care network. Therese Descamp wrote:

Spirit-filled Leadership: The Hummingbird and the Presbytery

By Therese Descamp

Like the rest of the members of Presbytery assembled in the small church, I sensed that something was wrong before I actually KNEW it. I kept trying to ignore a faint squawking at the edge of my consciousness. I glanced back once to see that the church doors were open, and assumed the commotion was outside. Then Dan stopped preaching, glanced up, and said, "Wow. Look at that!"

It was a hummingbird—a Rufus hummingbird, I later learned. It had apparently wandered in through the open doors and was doing its best to get out. Unfortunately, it was relying on instinct, which meant flying upwards toward light. But the light it flew toward was the ceiling fixtures rather than the sun; and, as it bashed itself against the sanctuary ceiling, it shrilled out its frustration.

The hummingbird had interrupted the last official act of Presbytery, Sunday morning worship. We'd been trying, all weekend, to speak frankly about the changes coming for the church. We talked about the fact that none of us could really know what church will look like; we just know that it won't look like what we are used to. We were trying to creatively imagine the future; we were trying to remind ourselves that God is with us in this great transition from mainstream to marginal. We were even letting our grief squeak out in tiny bits. The hapless hummingbird was interrupting our Conference President, Dan Chambers, as he spoke about the need to practice finding our way in this new place without landmarks.

The sermon stopped. The lights were turned off. Someone suggested opening the windows, but they weren't the kind that could be opened. Someone else suggested we all get quiet so it could hear its mates calling from outside. Then we were asked to pray. We waited. Someone got a bowl of sugar water; someone else walked down the aisle with a big bouquet of red plastic flowers. Some folks reminded the rest that eventually the bird really would tire, and then it could be put out.



But the hummingbird continued to smash against the ceiling and screech.

Our powerlessness was painful. You could feel the anguish in the air as the bird flew back and forth, back and forth, never landing, calling out its distress over and over. After ten minutes—it seemed like eternity—someone suggested that Dan continue his sermon. He did, but it was different; we were all divided, our hearts longing for the bird's release, our heads trying to attend.

In a short time, I heard something from the back, something different, something not so shrill and distressed. Hardly daring to hope, I turned around. There in the back corner next to the open door someone held high the dusty red flowers, now splashed with sugar water. There was my friend with his i-phone, playing a Rufus hummingbird call over and over. There was the bird, coming down—oh God, coming down to the flowers, taking off, coming down again, and finally resting long enough for the flowers to be walked out the door. When the hummingbird took flight outside, the church erupted in cheers.

We talk a lot in the church about living into change; we talk a lot about spirit-

filled leadership. But we don't often get an object lesson about this future of ours, and we don't often get to see how difficult it is to be a leader.

About this future of ours: just saying we're ready to be changed will not help us avoid pain. We are going to feel utter powerlessness when congregations choose old, instinctual solutions. If there's an ounce of compassion in us, it is going to hurt to watch communities smash themselves against barriers that can't be removed, or fly desperately towards light that isn't real. We may feel as if there is nothing we know how to do to make things better; and we may be right.

About the difficulty of being a leader: it won't be comfortable, and we will need each other desperately. I talked to my friend of the i-phone later, and he told me how long he waited to do anything because he wasn't sure he could really help. He told me how he had six different hummingbird calls loaded on the platform and no idea which one was right. We also spoke of how the person who knew that hummingbirds liked red flowers was necessary, as was the one who knew about the smell of sugar water. And how the rest of us needed to be silent and prayerful.

I don't know who was, really, the spirit filled leader that day. Was it the person with the technology, or the one with the knowledge of birds? Was it those who prayed? Those who pointed out that the bird would eventually tire and drop? Or could it have been the hummingbird—the Holy Spirit?—who showed us that spirit-filled leadership in our changing, marginalized church is going to be unpredictable, uncomfortable, and require our best creativity, our deepest cooperation.

"Spirit-filled leadership in our changing, marginalized church is going to be unpredictable, uncomfortable, and require our best creativity, our deepest cooperation"

When I was young my spiritual life was consumed with worrying about whether or not I would go to heaven when I died. I did my best to follow all the rules so that I could earn my way

through those pearly gates. At times I was really successful but at other times I wasn't. My faith was all about me and my getting to God. Later in life I began to discover that God cared about those who were not perfect just as much as he cared for those of us who tried hard to be. And the longer I am on this faith path the more inclusive and welcoming I discern God to be. The longer I am on this faith path the more I discover that God is constantly moving within our lives and world in ways we find hard to believe.

Just like Jesus I have come to discover that oftentimes the rules and traditions of our culture and faith stifle the spirit, we actually shut God out. We find ourselves like that persistent humming bird batting our heads against the window. But I know this is the way to do it we say. We've always done it this way.

Henri Nouwen said "love Jesus and love the way Jesus loved." That is the heart of our faith "Love Jesus and love the way Jesus loved." Let's look for a moment at how Jesus loved. "Now Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He looked up and saw a woman who was bent over – bent over for the last eighteen years....can you imagine what her life must have been like? Her world was defined by the small piece of ground around her toes, or what she could look at "on a slant," as one writer has described it. Just as people who live orderly, proper lives and never notice the suffering around them, just like my relationship with God was once defined by rules and technicalities, the bent-over woman was captive, bound by her ailment. She could not move freely, meet another person face-to-face, or look up to see the salvation – the healing – that was coming to her in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was teaching, he noticed the woman, and he spoke words of healing to her: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And then he touched her. Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Despite the protests of the synagogue leader, Jesus had broken the rules and put human welfare over religious obligation. He then went back to what he had been doing – teaching – and, in the very next verses, he began with the question, "What is the reign of God like?" In his act of healing, Jesus had shown the people what the reign of God was like, and then he went on to talk about it, too. Not just empty words, but action, too."¹

Jesus had broken the rules, he had healed on the Sabbath. See Jesus recognized that God doesn't long for us to follow the rules. The Holy longs for us to love. The rules and the traditions are meaningless if they do not transform our lives, makes us love God, neighbour and self more fully. The rules are meaningless if we don't welcome others in - not just on the surface but really welcome them to participate in our lives and faith.

Now it's easy for us to criticize the Pharisees who are disputing our Jesus but I can feel the tension. Kate Huey writes "The religious leader isn't mean-spirited; he's trying to press his case for obedient faithfulness. And so is Jesus. They both want to observe the Sabbath, but they don't

¹ Huey, Kate sermon on Luke 13:10-17 (1998)

agree about how to keep it. Jesus says the time for salvation isn't tomorrow; it's right now, no matter what day it is. In fact, maybe Sabbath is the perfect time for healing!"²

To love the way Jesus loved means as the church we are called to love not just those who are comfortable in our pews on a Sunday morning, those who we know well and belong in our little church community, but to love all people - everyday. Not just in the way we have always done it but in new ways of welcome. We are to love in a way that will shock us out of our complacency. Are we ready to give that kind of love? Are we ready to allow God to move us to more life, more love? These are the questions we have to be asking ourselves. If we are not ready then how shall we live? We have the opportunity on Sept. 19th to welcome the community of Squamish to experience our worship, our faith, and more importantly our God of welcome. Are we ready to welcome all of God's children to love like Jesus loved? When I look out amongst us I know we have to gifts, and the capabilities but I sense that something stops us, scares us, concerns us about the kind of love Jesus offers. Now that makes sense to me because the kind of love that we speak of does not hold the same boundaries or fears that human love does.

"Every single one of us, in our daily lives, has the occasion to encounter the bent-over woman." Every single one of us in our lives has the opportunity to see the spirit at work in new ways - constantly alive, moving, asking us to move with her. "The bent-over woman doesn't necessarily ask for healing – she didn't in the story. She just appeared, out of the shadows where pressed-down people so often live, and Jesus noticed her, and reached out."

Rather than turning his gaze from the lurking stranger hoping that she wasn't going to interrupt the schedule of worship Jesus noticed, embraced, offered grace. Unlike the humming bird Jesus saw that the way to freedom would mean taking an entirely different route. Like the people who gathered the flowers and sugar water and an iphone the spirit will use us in mysterious ways - call us to new learnings, new ways of being.

My friends I do not believe we are not here on a Sunday morning simply because we want to sit with one another. " We are not here because we like to sing or see our friends or just because we feel we should be in church, or even because someone is pressuring or influencing us to be here. No, I don't believe that. I believe that we are here this morning because somewhere in the deepest part of our spirit is a hunger for the reign of God. I believe that we long for the healing, and the justice, and the love and acceptance, and the peace that is the reign of God. We are here because we've come to know that we can't fix this world on our own, or even provide for ourselves on our own, and that our only real choice is to turn to God and one another for what we need and long for."³

² Huey, Kate

³ Huey, Kate

Hans Kung, defines the reign of God as "God's creation healed." God's creation – healed. The goal of the body of Christ is to participate in the healing of God's creation. Healing of poverty, racism, prejudice, misunderstanding, close-mindedness, injustice.

As Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "Let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the children of God."⁴

I do believe God is calling us as the community of Squamish United Church to embrace this kind of spirit. God is calling us, nudging us, breathing life into a new direction like sugar water, red plastic flowers and an iphone called out the humming bird God calls us. Are we panicking, screeching and banging ourselves up against the window so hard that we can't even hear the holy call? Or are we attentive, listening, prayerfully discerning a new way to freedom and fullness of life. I am so thankful that for God to reign on earth does not depend on our perfection but I also thank God that we have an opportunity to participate in creating a fuller life of grace and love for all we encounter.

Let us pray:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Melt us, mould us, fill us, use us. spirit of the living God fall afresh right now.

As we sing together let us do so prayerfully. As we do so pray for yourselves, for others, for our church community, and the wider community of Squamish.

⁴ IBID