

2017 06 25 TUMC Dangerous Liaisons - *We might just be moved.*

Song of Songs 8: 4-7

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!

Who is that coming up from the wilderness,
leaning upon her beloved?

Under the apple tree I awakened you.
There your mother was in labor with you;
there she who bore you was in labor.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned.

Just this last week, at the memorial service for a longtime member of the Student Christian Movement, we sang many of the old Social Gospel hymns from the SCM songbook. At the close of the service the familiar "We shall not, we shall not be moved" sprang up spontaneously.

It's a great song; a protest classic with Biblical overtones - "like a tree planted by the waters, we shall not be moved". On the streets it cools people off and helps a group find a sense of unity and purpose. The imagery of the song is firm and resolute. We are firm in our ideals and principles and position, and we shall not be moved. Even while we're getting dragged away by the police we shall not be moved!

But being firm in your principles is not the only virtue. Our summer preaching series is about times when this song does not apply. Times when "we might just be moved..." We are looking at stories of encounter between differences. And we are looking at experiences of mutual conversion. Times in the scriptures where preaching, learning, conversion happens in multiple ways, in different directions. Places where we may, in fact, be moved. We may find ourselves questioning our beliefs. We may find ourselves offering a new perspective.

Now, we don't have coffee time today, but if we get the chance to talk after the service, I will ask you to tell me about an experience you have had of mutual conversion or a time when you have been moved by a new perspective.

We chose the title 'Dangerous Liaisons'. Dangerous Liaisons is a film based on a play based on a book, telling a story of some truly dreadful people playing an aristocratic game of sexual conquests, intrigue and betrayals. We follow the Viscomte de Valmont as he accepts a challenge to seduce a virtuous and pious woman. In this cynical and corrupt environment he commits the only sin - he falls in love. As a result of this failing he loses his arrogant poise, his social power and his life.

What does this appalling story have to do with our preaching series, other than a nice title? We are looking at stories where two people meet, and both are changed. We are acknowledging that these liaisons are dangerous. They are risky, and also, necessary.

Encounter with difference can be scary, unsettling. In the blink of an eye we ask fearful questions - Is this person a friend? Can I trust them? Do they wish me harm? Sometimes these are quite literal. Will this person hurt me? Will they hate me? Will they like me too much? And in the blink of an eye we activate some of our tools and strategies to control the situation, to keep safe, or comfortable (two different things).

Because if you can't control the situation, there is the risk that something real might happen. A new encounter can teach you something new about yourself. Who am I with this person? Am I comfortable or cautious? Am I funny or serious? The question is really, how will we react to each other? Will I regret this? How truthful can I be with this person? If they know who I really am, will I be safe?

These encounters with difference where you are not in control are Dangerous Liaisons, because you don't know what might happen. Like Mr Bilbo said: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."

These risky encounters are also necessary. They are generative, creative, transformative. They are the opportunity to consider and re-consider things we take for granted. To experience something of the other perspective. And sometimes, there is a sharing of views, or a joint experience, leading to mutual conversion.

I will not say much about mutual conversion, as this sermon is about the encounter of difference. Just to be clear though, mutual conversion is not swapping your beliefs so that you now believe what they believed and they believe what you believed, like changing places. It is also not necessarily both parties arriving at an identical middle ground. Mutual conversion means that both experience significant change as a result of the encounter. Perhaps both are called into a deeper sense of their own distinct belief systems. Or both revise their pre judgement of the other.

Once a month I spend the night at the Church of Saint Stephen-in-the-Fields in Kensington Market. Last summer, the church began opening its doors on Friday nights

through to Saturday mornings, after a fatal shooting nearby. The intention was to create a safe zone for anyone feeling agitated or afraid, and to have trained volunteers ready to provide assistance and de-escalation if necessary. The Church stays open all night and serves breakfast.

I was asked to volunteer, as someone with familiarity with the Church and some experience in de-escalation in situations of direct violence. I assumed I would be bored most of the time. Indeed this was part of the mandate - to create a boring experience where tempers do not flare. Finally, I thought, a good excuse to bore everyone! But the experience turned out to be quite different. Many of those accessing the church are not avoiding direct violence, but are victims of the indirect violence of poverty, vulnerably housed or unhoused, and looking for a place to sleep. Others do not or cannot sleep, and pass the night in banter, singing, playing the piano or discussing politics. The sleepers and and singers conflict less frequently than I would have imagined, but when they do, it is hardly ever me, the trained and equipped peacemaker, who takes the vital steps to cool tempers and restore calm.

After all, I am only there once a month, bleary-eyed by 5am and struggling to stay awake. The folks who really create the safe space are the people who are there every week, who make it part of their routine, and who know how important it is to keep everyone safe, out of the line of sight of the police, who know what a harsh thing it is to ban someone from a space like this. These folks have the skills and the motivation to keep everyone safe, no matter how troublesome.

So as I am not much needed as a peacemaker, I tried to focus my energies on hosting. We eat very well. Local restaurants and the theological colleges send over their end of day stock, Kensington regulars drop by with contributions, and the cycle of events in this busy church mean there is always a bizarre multicultural melange of leftovers to shape into meals throughout the night. This food as an ordinary miracle of provision. The miracle is not that there is always enough food for everyone. It is that we share the food, and this sharing satisfies. The food is a gift and it is received as a gift as long as it lasts. I have learned that I must also accept this gift. I cannot call myself the host. I am also a guest.

I may carry the keys and have access to the Naloxone kit, but I am also a guest, a recipient of hospitality, invited to relax, talk mysticism, stare at the walls or make up a plate. I am given the space to be present first as myself, not as host, or volunteer, or middle-class, housed, educated office worker. No one asks the questions of fear, but we ask the questions of invitation. It does not matter who you are or what your life is. Would you like to share this meal? Would you like to find some rest?

It is a place of encounter, where I risk being changed.

The United Church of Canada was one of the first to issue an apology to Indigenous Peoples for its role in cultural genocide - although they didn't use that term. A friend of mine was at the gathering in 1986 when the apology, prepared by the National Church's General Assembly was brought to the elders of the Indigenous Church. She tells me about the surprise and mixed responses when the elders received but did not accept the apology. This upset some people. After all, these Indigenous people had asked for the apology. What was meant by this refusal to accept it? For others, realization began to dawn. This was before the TRC, even before Ipperwash and Oka. The elders were asserting their agency and offering the start of a relationship of truth that continues to transform the church.

It was a place of encounter, where the Indigenous and Settler Churches risked a new relationship.

It was during my university years in Scotland that I encountered the peace teachings of Jesus for the first time, after a church upbringing that did not include Jesus's teachings like the beatitudes. I began to look critically at my society and its violence, and my place within it. I began to get involved in political causes. I had a hard time with the social element of it, though. My new friends weren't Christians. They liked to go out to the pub, and many were part of the campus LGBT club. What was the risk to my own faith from this association? I had to think about it.

It was not until years later that I would realise the risk that these friends took in accepting me. Offering friendship to an Evangelical Christian who had no idea that Christians could say anything other than homosexuality is wrong. I could have caused real harm. And yet, they took the risk. The radical inclusion modelled by that community, which had space even for me, is something I am immensely grateful for, and proud of. It would not be until years after that, and in a different circumstance, that I was able to come out to myself as gay.

I did not trick my way into activist circles by hiding my Christianity. I came with it, somewhat cautious, somewhat fearful, and I was welcomed with kindness. In each of these cases, an encounter with difference risks rejection and pain, but somehow new understandings and new relationships emerge. For this to happen, there must be vulnerability and honesty.

If I had hidden my faith and its conflicts, I would have denied my LGBT friends the chance to respond to me. If the Indigenous Church had said 'sure, yeah, you're forgiven' it would have satisfied the conversation and led to nothing. Or, if I explained to everyone arriving at the safe space that I was the host and insisted on serving them a plate of food I had portioned out, it would deny them the chance to host me and each other.

The power at work here is love. It is the boundary-breaking, overwhelming, threatening power of love, and the reading from the Song of Songs speaks to this.

Now, these days it's fashionable to scoff at metaphorical readings of Song of Songs, after so many years of preachers using it only to talk about Christ's love for the church, and I'm obligated to mention that, yes, this is indeed an erotic love poem. But look at our reading, here. It is a joyful warning - Sister, don't awaken love until the time is right. Because love is powerful. It is strong as death, a raging flame, it scorns earthly wealth and love will MESS YOU UP.

Dangerous Liaisons are encounters that risk powerful love. They are times when you are vulnerable, setting aside prepared roles and prejudged opinions and dare to honestly say 'this is who I am'. Jesus took this risk when he came to us, when we rejected his love, his frightening truth, his powerful words. We did our best to drown the love he showed. But many waters cannot quench love.

And love is never wasted, never lost. Not to God. No impulse of love. No office of care. Jesus meets us again on the Emmaus road.

Being vulnerable and being rejected is one risk. Being vulnerable and being accepted is another risk. Consider the terror of finding out that you actually do love your neighbour, or enemy. How will I have to change? How can I know who I am now? "We might just, we might just be moved", be changed, be made new by love.

If you and I are different, let's be honest about that. Can we still sing together, take communion together, serve God together? Can we do that, knowing that we are different? Can we be mutually vulnerable? Will you offer me your own, vulnerable truth, giving me the power to bless you with my own love - and can you forgive me for the times I have not responded in a loving way?

Will you walk up with me from the wilderness, leaning on me, because we love each other?

This is my question, my conviction, and this is my prayer. Amen.