

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, February 9, 2020
“Both / And” (Isaiah 58:3-12)

Are you familiar with the term “synchronicity”? It’s when two or more events occur in a meaningful manner, but have no discernible causal connection. Others may dismiss it as mere coincidence, but you see something more.

A week ago Thursday, I met with Todd Macdonald, the Pastoral Relations Minister for Shining Waters Region, and clergy from Aurora, Richmond Hill, Lemonville and Unionville to talk about life in the changing church. Todd offered us a meditation from Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, and founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation. Now, I have read several of Richard Rohr’s books and listened to him speak at a conference for spiritual directors, but I had not heard of this centre. I was intrigued by Rohr’s linking of social action, being out in the world doing justice, with contemplation, that turning inward which can change our consciousness, allowing us to see the world through God’s eyes - the undivided goodness of all that is.

Then I flipped open my March edition of “Broadview”, and there was an article entitled “Soulwork” about this very Centre. The author remarks that the CAC was set up by Rohr in 1987 “after noting that most social activists were not happy and most spiritual seekers weren’t activists.” That was enough to convince me: I went online immediately to sign up for the daily meditations. The synchronicity didn’t stop there. When I turned to the Hebrew Scripture passage for this week, I discovered that Third Isaiah who lived in a far different time and place than Rohr’s twenty-first century New Mexico also spoke in terms of both /

and - both worship and action, both spiritual practice and efforts to make sure the needs of all are met.

That may sound simple, and yet, time and again we human beings turn both / and into either / or. Look at the Hebrew people. They are back in Jerusalem after their seventy years of exile. They are doing an excellent job of religious observance - fasting, wearing sackcloth and covering themselves in ashes, but what about sharing their bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into their homes, and satisfying the needs of the afflicted - not so much. Since fasting is not something United Church types tend to engage in except perhaps for giving up chocolate or junk food in Lent, we might be tempted to think this has no connection with us, no relevance for us today.

But wait. We may not be given to great displays of religious piety, but do we have a tendency to turn inward, to focus on ourselves - our needs, our wants - particularly when times are hard? Since I was ordained in 1984, every congregation I've worked with, apart from Bloor Street with its hefty endowment fund, has had a struggle to balance its budget, and has sometimes run a deficit. Such financial insecurity can lead us to concentrate our attention on our own needs as a congregation: how can we get more people in the pews, not to join in our exciting mission and participate in our joyful life together, but to contribute to our coffers; how can we earn more money through rentals and fund raising events? Such turning inward is further fostered by the fact that so many of our congregations are located in areas that are changing. In southern Manitoba, it is farms growing larger in order to be economically viable - meaning fewer and

fewer people on the land. In Coldwater, it is an influx of urbanites retiring to the country and workers putting up with longer commutes in exchange for cheaper housing. In Richmond Hill, it is shifting demographics as Russians, Persians and Chinese choose to make this city their home. Here, in East Gwillimbury, you don't need me to point out that new subdivisions are mushrooming where once it was all farmland. The world is changing around us. We may feel we can't keep up so we might as well give up and focus on ourselves - on maintaining our own building, worship services and programmes.

We live in a society and an age of technology which encourage this kind of turning inward. I walk around Richmond Hill, trying to greet everyone I meet, but it isn't easy because most people have their earbuds in place, listening to music or talking on their phones; many heads are down, eyes fixed on screens, and fingers tapping. Physically, they may be in a park or on a busy sidewalk, but they are off in world of their own. When I walk around Sharon, I do not encounter this same challenge mainly because I see very few people other than the odd worker with a telecommunications or construction company. Now, I acknowledge it is winter and day time when many may be at work or school - if it is not a strike day! - but still I suspect the environment itself works against social interaction.

Subdivisions tend to be built for cars, not pedestrians: homeowners emerge only to get into their vehicles and on return may drive straight into their garages.

Houses are large; yards are small. Indoors is where activity happens, and with all the blinds and shutters, it is highly unlikely that a passerby like me will catch even a glimpse of a human being. I would argue that the combination of technology

and our environment is turning us inward - a trend which is reinforced by fear - fear of contracting the flu or now the corona virus, fear of violence, fear of the stranger.

When we turn inward whether we are the Hebrew people concentrating on our religious observance or Canadians cocooning in our homes and / or with our technology, we are not noticing what is going on around us; we are not in touch with the needs of our community. Along comes Isaiah with his reminder of both / and: the inward turn towards God leads into an outward turn towards the neighbour - the one who is hungry or homeless, suffering or oppressed. Along comes Richard Rohr with his Centre for Action and Contemplation inviting us to nurture our relationship with God through meditation and prayerful readings, through spending time in nature and being mindful in the moment - all so we can be transformed and grow into the people God intended: human beings who act with compassion and caring in this world God loves.

It is a matter of both / and. What might that look like for us as individuals? Might that mean trying a new spiritual practice? Maybe, you'll join me in signing up for Richard Rohr's daily meditation and / or during the season of Lent, we could try a spiritual practices playground to explore a wide variety of approaches to discover the one(s) that suit us best. Maybe, we'll make an effort to be more present to the world around us and open and responsive to the people who cross our path. We might take up the Face-to-Face February Challenge created by some students at Centennial College. Did you hear about it on CBC Radio? Aware that social interaction encourages empathy, they are inviting people to put

down their electronic devices, and take on a different challenge each day this month. For example, smile and give a compliment to a stranger.

It is a matter of both / and. What might that look like for us as a congregation? We have an opportunity to learn more about our neighbours through our involvement in Living Presence Ministry. Bri-Anna Swan is coming on Sunday, February 23rd, to answer our questions. With her help, I am expecting to learn something about the people who live in those newly built houses - their needs, their gifts. That may give us a springboard for action. Who knows, Phil's suggestion last week of raised vegetable beds might turn into a real community garden where people from the subdivisions and people from this congregation might meet and be enriched by the experience.

It is a matter of both / and: an inward turn towards God leads to an outward turn towards our neighbours. When both are present, we and our world may be transformed. In the words of Isaiah, we may become like a watered garden; we may be called restorers of streets to live in.

I caught a glimpse of what this transformation might look like through "Broadview" in an article about a "small farm just outside Winnipeg, donated by a landscape architect and United Church member [and] run by 42 Yazidi families with the support of numerous local organizations of different faiths." The land, formerly used as a nursery, had been flooded out several years ago and left idle. The Yazidis before they were forced out of Iraq had been tending their fertile fields, growing eggplants, tomatoes, zucchini and potatoes. Now, through their care, this Canadian farm is producing enough food not only to feed them, but

also to sell at farmers' markets, and give to the Food Bank. At the same time, being on the land is helping these refugees who have experienced trauma and hardship. A religious and ethnic minority who have long been persecuted, ISIS targeted them for death and their women and children for sexual slavery or training as fighters and suicide bombers. As a young mother observed: "I'm comfortable at the farm... It feels like home." Healing for both human beings and the land.

Both / and. Thanks be to God who draws us inward to attune our hearts with God's and sends us outward to meet our neighbours with caring and compassion. Amen.