

SERMON P131 FOR JANUARY 29, 2017

On Friday night, my theatre friends and I went to a play called “Playing With Fire.” The subtitle is “The Theo Fleury Story.” For those of you who are hockey fans of a certain age, you will remember Fleury as a small-for-a-hockey-player, aggressive dynamo who set the hockey world on fire. He played for several NHL teams and was most remembered for his time with the Calgary Flames. His raw talent and his spirit made him part of the Flames team that beat Montreal in the Stanley Cup Final.

There is more to Fleury’s story than the time he spent on ice. His personal life was a disaster of monumental proportions. He was sexually abused by his coach, Graham James, when he was a young teen. We all know that abuse of any kind is evil because it robs the victim of his/her person and agency. It takes away an individual’s life and power to feel worthwhile and valued. The experience of abuse leaves a great dark pit in the heart of the victim, a profound wound that requires great energy and will to heal.

The dirty, life-denying abuse-wound afflicted Fleury and it took decades of time to heal. It cost him 50 million dollars of wasted income, alcohol addiction, drug abuse, broken relationships, profound self-loathing, and a ruined hockey career. This mess nearly cost him his life before redemption set in.

I honestly don’t know how the actor, Shaun Smythe, was able to face the story night after night. And he had no option. It was a one-person play. Just taking it in brought me to my knees. There has never been a time in ministry

when I have not been walking the road with people who share Fleury's story. The play was all too real, brilliantly painful and beautifully broken.

Now, for some days before I went to Theatre Aquarius on Friday, I had been reading the Beatitudes, the piece Isobel read for you this morning. I read them many times, prayed them, contemplated them, pondered them, agonized over what in heaven's name Jesus was doing, and I took them with me to the theatre. As Theo Fleury skated across the stage, and as the story of his joys and sorrows spilled out, I was hearing another story, the "blessed are you" story, the "happy are they" story, the "fortunate are the ones" story.

I brought the Beatitudes with me, quietly, interiorly, separate from the theatre experience, so I thought. But what I found was that the play and the poetry of Jesus began to vibrate with the same frequency. The two swirled together in my imagination. They became partners for me in what was an astounding spiritual dance, a dance of beauty and pain, of lost and found, of despair and hope, of death and resurrection.

The Beatitudes are the place we need to start to seek spirit wisdom today. Things will make more sense if we begin there. The most frequent word in these teachings of Jesus is blessed or happy or fortunate. The goal of the teaching is to remind us of who is blessed or happy or fortunate. The blessed are not who we think they might be. In the "happy are" list are the poor in spirit, the grief-stricken, the meek or powerless, those hungering for righteousness, and those persecuted for the sake of what is just and fair.

Who in his/her right mind would call these strugglers happy or blessed?

We can get on board with blessed be the pure in heart, or the peacemakers, or the merciful. Although if we push our assumptions a bit, we are forced to own up to the fact that there are peacemakers because there is violence, there is acknowledgement of the pure in heart because in our world, they are often seen as off-beat or crazy, and the merciful get mentioned because mercy is not always reciprocated. Jesus calls the most surprising people blessed. Why?

I think that the strugglers are blessed or fortunate because it is the holy that blesses. Built into creation is the capacity for transformation, change from pain to healing. It is not the absence of life-pain that makes us happy. Who in your experience fits that description-that their life is magically pain-free? Being human means that there will be times when we ache with hurt. Dodging disappointment is not what makes us happy or blessed. Experiencing transformation is our blessing. Knowing that we live wrapped in the positive energy of the holy is our blessing. Knowing that all the little deaths we endure are not the end of the story is our blessing. Trusting that resurrection transforms ends into new beginnings is beatitude.

So, yes, blessed are those who sorrow, for the comfort of friends that holds the grieving in the light brings relief. I know this with my whole heart, because you have been my blessing. Yes, blessed are the powerless, for they will become empowered by love. Yes, blessed are those who hunger for justice and right relationship, for they shall be satisfied by shalom. Built into all creation

is the capacity for change, transformation, resurrection. Those who trust that this is God are blessed, happy, fortunate.

Jesus taught blessing to the disciples in the very beginning of their life together. I wonder if they welcomed it then, or if it only made sense three years later in moments of denial or betrayal or crucified endings,

For Theo Fleury, resurrection was possible only at rock bottom, when all that he valued was gone and when all his remedies failed to let him forget the abuse and pain. When all his cures for his suffering could not touch his pain, he gave in to his powerlessness and looked beyond himself to a greater power. What he found was love that was not turned off by his agony, but held him close. In the circle of the holy, he found healing and wholeness, dignity and hope. He learned, for the first time in his life that he was blessed. No matter how many poor choices he had made, he was happy. No matter what he had lost, he was found. He became one of the pure in heart and could see God.

The same is possible for each of us. With confidence, we claim our life is beatitude and our best prayer is may blessing be. May blessing be.