

Swimming in God's Love

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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In the image you see, is a sculpture, underwater – beautiful, serene. There is, of course, as with everything in life, a story that you only discover if you care to learn it.

I learned that this is one of 6 underwater sculptures at Cannes, France. Yes, the home of the Film Festival. To create these beautiful sculptures, artist Jason deCaires Taylor¹ put an ad in a local newspaper, inviting locals to have their faces cast into art. He cast 40 chosen faces, then narrowed them down to 6 each blown up into six-foot-tall sculptures, he chose: a curator, an entrepreneur, 3 schoolchildren, and an old fisherman. He used pH neutral cement, and his goal was to raise awareness about the declining state of the world's oceans. It is important to note that this art installation was commissioned by the local mayor's office. Leaders there are well aware that this once fertile French Riviera fishing ground has been polluted by human activity, especially tourism.



An ecosystem, fragile, yet so beautiful.

You might look in your Bible, or whatever digital Bible platform you use, to find Jesus tell the tragic parable of the *Rich Fool*.² That was how I heard it told to me as a child by my parents. The tycoon with a wheat empire, so much that he had no room to store it. He invested his heart and resources in a silo to hold it. He went to sleep with visions of money and power, but that night a divine voice said to him: Ah, if only you realized how little you had. No one who loves you, and tonight no one to grieve because you will die, alone.

Jesus then launches into his teaching about the importance of letting go, not worrying. There is more to life than food and more to the body than clothing, Jesus said: Consider the ravens: they neither plant nor harvest, they have no silo or barn, yet God feeds them. ... Notice how the lilies grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth.³

God's kin-dom vision is about more than not clinging to possessions. It is a big part. But it is about letting go, generally. That is hard, letting go – of control, of certainty, of the need to have everything in hand. It is natural to want it, even need it. But this world is going to drive us crazy.

¹ To find out more, read or visit Architectural Digest, "Cannes, France, Opens Its Stunning Underwater Museum", by Nadja Sayej, February 23, 2021. Online: <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/cannes-france-opens-stunning-underwater-museum>

² Jesus' parable of the "Rich Fool" in Luke - <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+12%3A+16-21&version=MSG> (this is a very modern translation called "The Message")

³ Luke chapter 12, starting at verse 22. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+12%3A+22-31&version=CEB>

Now, I look to today's parable of the self-righteous religious leader and the repentant tax collector. Ah, there is the religious leader again in Luke's story; it doesn't matter, he could be any mainline faith tradition. He thinks he has it all figured out. His rules will save him.

I remember when I was a theology student, not sure at all. I still have my days of doubt that I read the divine tea leaves correctly. But there I was, in my final interviews to test my sense of call. I had focused on Martin Luther's "Priesthood of all Believers"⁴ teaching, the good "Protestant" I am, drawing from Luther. Luther in the 1500s had been a Roman Catholic Priest, but he felt that his Catholic tradition gave a lot of credence to doing the *right* thing, giving the *proper* amount, even that giving some amount of money would secure a reward in heaven. Luther read the Book of Romans, Paul talking about Grace.⁵ This divine gift, Grace, you cannot earn it, you can't buy, you cannot store it up. It's just there. This is humbling for religious leaders who feel they have it – they've prayed the right prayers, lived right. Even the town scoundrel can experience God's love, says Jesus, perhaps they are a shining example of God's kin-dom unfolding on earth as it is in heaven.

I was holding to this idea of Martin Luther's that God's church needs the scoundrel as much as the priest. A minister on the Interview Board must have grilled me for 15 gruelling minutes, calling my theology flimsy and naïve. I can only say in retrospect that I was not at all brilliant in my defense, but I was somehow ordained. I kind of felt that like that heap of a tax collector.

We cling to things. We are human. I wonder about that raven, does it really not store up food? Doing a bit of research about the raven of Jesus' parable, I discovered that ravens are rather mischievous but smart animals. They tend to eat anything – they, like many humans, eat vegetation but also roadkill. I learned that scientists have observed ravens to lead wolf packs to a carcass in order that the wolves will do the hard work, then the ravens move in after, to enjoy the leftovers. They are mischievous, and very smart in many different folk legends. Isn't it interesting that Jesus uses this bird in his illustration, comparing it to humans.

Maybe we need to step back from our preconceived principles: who is a good person, who lives a righteous life. We can come back to that core teaching of Jesus – love your neighbour, as you would want to be loved. Love your neighbour, every neighbour, no exceptions.

Don't love that person that you passed, sitting on the street, out of pity, or as a token gesture of sympathy. Love that person because they are God's child, equal in every

⁴ Martin Luther said, "There is no true, basic difference between lay[people] and priests . . . between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do." To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in Luther's Works, 44:129. Published August 1520.

⁵ During the Protestant Reformation, Lutheran and Calvinist theologians generally believed the Catholic doctrine of the means of grace to be a mixture of reliance upon the grace of God and confidence in the merits of one's own works performed in love, pejoratively called "legalism". The Reformers posited that salvation is *entirely comprehended in God's gifts (that is, God's act of free grace)*, dispensed by the Holy Spirit according to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ alone. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_gratia

way to me. I even love that person who behaves badly, that arrogant church leader even as they misinterpret their Biblical call to righteous living. I want to think that I'm in more right relationship with God than that other person, but Jesus here is saying, "No Dave. That person could very well be, in God's eyes, more righteous than you."

God's Grace works like that. It lavishes love and blessing upon the scoundrel, the publican, the no-good-son-or-daughter-of-a-gun that seems to me behaving badly. All that work I've done to get it right doesn't put me ahead in the race for salvation. We are all loved.

It is like watching the magic of Special Olympics, where all but one athlete finishes the race, but then the athletes and the crowd all focus on the last competitor struggling to finish. Everyone cheers. There is no victory dance for the medallists. They are investing their energy into getting that last competitor home.

Isn't that ideal in sport a modern analogy for Jesus' parable? In the spiritual race, in God's Grace, every child of God is cheered on to the finish line of faith. The finish line *not being death*, but the finish being God's kin-dom transformation where rules and symbols of success that humans have created crumble. We celebrate instead a world where all are welcome, and all can find peace and love.

How do we work towards that in this coming week? Perhaps it begins with our attitudes and actions, Seeing every loved one and stranger alike as a beloved Child of God. Is that "Swimming in God's Love", God's ecosystem that is very different from how our world works? Amen.