**Bold Love and Faith**

**Narrative Lectionary Epiphany 5**

**February 10, 2019**

Matthew 7: 1-14; 24-29 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the slave trade in North America. The first African slaves were sold into human bondage in [August 1619](https://www.roanoke.com/news/virginia/next-year-marks-years-since-first-african-slaves-arrived-in/article_2a5900cd-a85e-56d0-b8d3-0c921da0e1f3.html) in Jamestown, Virginia. We continue to see the remnants of this racism in the leadership in Virginia and the controversies heard this past week – state leaders admitting to wearing blackface as a costume. Yet we also see resilience and strong members of the black community in power, leadership and arts in so many places. Part of Black History Month is not only looking to and lamenting the past oppressive history, but celebrating the cultures and resilience of a people, a people who need to be valued, respected, and treated with the same dignity as all people.

This is part of the message in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount today. The passage today begins with the statement “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”. The translation here can be misleading. Much of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ life is about judgement and discerning. The word used in Greek, is actually a present tense form of the word condemn, so it is actually meaning, ‘do not condemn others to hell’. This places a different emphasis and reality on the saying. Jesus is saying, we have no right to say who is going to hell, who is outside of God’s grace. The command forbids denying mercy, even dignity, to another. We are to uphold and encourage the dignity of all. This is an important message for Black History Month. As we learn about the history and honour the past and present cultures of black peoples, we move towards respecting their dignity.

Jesus ends the sermon with a parable of building a house on rocky or sandy ground, as a reference to those who hear and act on his words or hear and do not act on the words. It is a literal reference to their local experience - where flash floods were common. Houses built on the ground would be washed away, while those on a solid rock foundation would stand. It was cheaper and easier to build on the ground or sand but not safer, nor very smart. We are called to act on and live out Jesus’ commands and sayings, which can provide a strong foundation in life. It does not indicate that following him will protect us or shelter us from the storms. We know this all too well this week as we are shaken by the news of the tragic death of Heather and Jim’s daughter and Taylor’s sister, Rachel Balfour. Our faith and solid foundation helps us through times like this for the Balfour family. The support and love they have experienced from their communities as God's love and support is sustaining them through this terrible time. Indeed, they asked me to share this message with you:

We would like to extend our grateful and heartfelt thanks to all of our dear friends at Eastside United Church. The messages of comfort, consolation and condolence offered following the death of our beloved Rachel, mean more to us than you will know. Your prayers, care and love are supporting us and your strength is sustaining us in this difficult time.

The solid foundation of love lived out, is God’s presence with us during these times.

Remembering we are not alone as we both give and draw love and support, can be a foundation that not only sustains us through all kinds of struggles but can help us speak out so others are aware of our struggles. For those who are oppressed and go through terrible struggles, like Black people since the slave trade, it is not very often they have a voice to tell their stories. When they do, it is a privilege for us to hear it, and if we really listen, it can be a profound, respectfulexperience. Are we able to honour the vulnerability it takes to share such a story? The experience may make us mindful of the resilience that some people who are oppressed can have. We hear their stories and may be moved by where they are now in spite of the pain and suffering they have endured. Some of this resilience may be because they have strong foundations in family, faith, and community. We know about the gospel spirituals which many of us may know sustained them through their work and were used to communicate to each other about the underground railroad and meeting places. There are black people today who share their stories, struggle and their strong faith that resonates in their music. I want to share two examples of hip hop artists who express their faith in their music. This information was inspired by the December Observer article [*The Gospel of Rap*](https://www.ucobserver.org/culture/2018/12/the_gospel_of_rap/)*.*

The first is Canadian Hip-Hop artist Shad, who had a stint hosting the CBC program ‘Q’ and is secured as our main performance for Skylight Festival this summer. He has a new album: A Short Story About a War which tells the story of a fictional world consumed by war, with various factions and philosophies clashing, and in the middle of it all, one character who doesn’t believe in the power of bullets (which may be a reference to Jesus). The poetic storytelling weaves its way through themes of migration, environment, economics, politics, and most critically, the deepest parts of our spirit. From that album is the Fool Pt. 1 (Get it, Got it, Good). As you listen, see if you can catch where Shad asks a question of God and the road he is walking. Also listen to the reference to Judas and see if you can get what his message is.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVHv6Z_UhKo&list=RDmVHv6Z_UhKo&start_radio=1>

When Shad asks a question of God, *what do you make of the road I’m walking*

 Shad acknowledges that when times get tough, he needs to remember that God is with him, when he says “Who got me?...You got me good”

At the end of the song, Shad makes a reference to Judas and infers the disciples will be challenged when they meet him in heaven.

I was struck by the line “It’s hell on earth, anywhere love isn’t present”. Do you have times when you have not felt love or know of people who have had or live in that experience? It really can feel like hell. We wonder how they survive, yet many do. Shad recognizes that God’s grace and forgiveness would find Judas in heaven. How do we feel about finding those in heaven who we don’t expect? This idea will be explored in our time together next Sunday.

The other artist I wanted to share a song of is by Chance the Rapper. Chance is a very popular up and coming rapper who is very obvious and open about his faith. In this song, he recognizes the importance of blessings. Listen for where he names there is a difference between blessings and worldly possessions. He also identifies the challenge of fitting praise into a four minute song, see if you can notice what his response to that is. This song Blessings, is very clearly a song of faith.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxMApS0QXcE>

These are examples of public faith expressed in popular music. God is active outside the church. As the author of the Observer article, Kira-Lynn Ferderber says: “While the church asks where the young people are, the reality is that many of us are finding spiritual guidance in rap…I view rappers as some of the most public, vocal people of faith today, praising God while wrestling with questions of social justice and equality.” These artists express their faith boldly and publicly. It challenges me as I know I am not always comfortable doing so. How are you at proclaiming your faith publicly? Note that neither of them were imposing their faith or trying to convert, they were sharing their story, their experience. An experience that includes a strong foundation in their faith to express it so publicly.

Jesus’ call was for discipleship to happen in everyday practices for his followers. How do we love, and treat one another with dignity and respect? In what ways do we think about how others would want to be treated? Sometimes it is not easy, and at times is very challenging, which is why Jesus says “the gate is narrow, and the way is hard”. We are told it takes bold love but, with trust, the rewards are great. May we live that bold love and dignity for all, with a strong foundation to weather the storms and be with others through the storms of life.