

Sermon, June 20th, 2010
Rev. Eilert Frerichs

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've entitled my reflections on today's Gospel reading "Kathy" in honour of my friend Kathy whom I knew thirty – thirty-five years ago when I worked as the United Church's Chaplain at the University of Toronto. I have not thought about Kathy for many, many years and she disappeared completely from my life until I began to read and to think about Luke's story.

You see, I am thinking of Kathy because the writer of the Gospel story got it all wrong. It really happened this way:

I got off the subway at College and Yonge to take the streetcar home. As I came up to the street, I saw Kathy, disheveled as usual, her hair stringy, her clothes dirty, talking at the top of her voice in her slightly British accent, yelling obscenities at the passersby. A group of young men began to harass her and naturally, Kathy grew more and more agitated.

I had known Kathy for many years by then: she was a regular in the basement coffee shop at Hart House where I was working. She would sit at her table, a large coffee in front of her, often talking loudly to herself, always making other people feel uncomfortable or afraid. Sometimes she was writing poetry and leave quietly when her coffee was finished, dragging her rucksack along with her.

When she was acting out or getting too loud or her language became too dirty for the staff to deal with, I would be called in to deal with Kathy. That's how I got to know her a bit, and learned a bit of her story as well. I'd take her up to my office where I usually managed to calm her down. She grew to trust me a bit and occasionally she would present me with one of her poems.

Then Kathy disappeared for a few years until that day I saw her again at the streetcar stop at College and Yonge. I tried to get the group of young people to stop harassing her and put my arms around her to protect her. And then one of them spat on me and they ran away and left us alone.

That was the last time I saw her; but for the first time I experienced a little bit of what it must be like to be Kathy: an object of fear and derision, an outcast, to be made fun of, worthy only to be spat on.

That was her last gift to me, because I never saw her again after that incident.

An object of fear and derision, not a person with mental health issues; not a person who lived in poverty because of her health problems. Not a person at all, but someone with mental health issues.

Most of us, I suspect, know or have known people like Kathy, members of our own families, perhaps, or people who come to the drop-in in this church. Indeed, most of the people who live on the streets of our city have some mental health issues, and most of the time we studiously avoid them. For them, the streets and the shelter system are indeed like the graveyard in Luke's telling of the story.

Jesus, according to Luke, frees the man from his demons and allows them to possess a herd of pigs. How appropriate: demons are unclean and pigs, for a faithful Jew, are unclean, too. They are made for each other, both equally untouchable for a member of God's chosen people. But Jesus reaches out to someone who is unclean and he is restored to personhood. The man is healed and all is well. I doubt that my experience of the story has an equally happy ending.

Nonetheless... nonetheless: the point of both Luke's and my version of the story is surely the same: as we reach out to someone who is untouchable, their personhood is restored if only for a little while; a non-person becomes a person again; she or he is freed, if only for a few moments, from the graveyard where they are living, from the mental health system, from the shelter system, from the social welfare system, from the street.

When a non-person becomes a person again they gift us: with their poems, like Kathy, and with their stories, like the man in Luke's Gospel, who goes all over town telling his story.

Being able to gift us or sharing the story means that we are equals, that we accept each other, that at least a measure of trust is established between us. For me to accept your gift and to hear your story allows me to enter your life, to walk at least part of the way with you. We become one with one another, and a certain wholeness is established.

Those ghastly, ugly fences that have been erected all over downtown in the name of the established order have been taken down in the story both Luke and I are telling this morning. The established order is that non-persons like Kathy and the man in the graveyard are consigned to living beyond the fence, beyond the pale, to be controlled by the police, court and prison system, the mental health and the drug system, the school system, the shelter system and so on and on. And it is not just Kathy and the man in the graveyard who are consigned to living beyond the fence of the established order of our politics, our economics and our respectability, there are many, many others... native people, young people, many of the elderly, many people of colour, people who seek peace and justice, refugees...

Yet there are signs of hope that it is possible to break down the fence, that non-persons can become persons, that the voiceless can find their own voice. You see, and with that I want to bring these reflections to a close: a really significant miracle is taking place right now in our country: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which aims to enable native people to tell their stories about their experience in residential schools. This Commission will travel the length and breadth of our country for the next five years and just held its first national event in Winnipeg this past week.

What a remarkable gift this can be for all Canadians: to hear formerly voiceless people tell their truth to the rest of us so that we might hear and be transformed and more of the people God wants us all to be. Amen.