

April 23, 2020

Trinity Musings #9: Rev Brian Goodings (self-isolating and full of admiration for caregivers, in my office at Trinity United Church: Collingwood)

Andrea and I came upon a very woozy racoon last Saturday. It was the middle of the day and we were on a bike ride down a gravel road near our house. We stopped to look at it though we were careful to stand behind our bikes. The rather large punch-drunk racoon was wobbling in-place, on the shoulder of the road. Suddenly we heard a very loud shout “DO NOT TOUCH THAT ANIMAL!” The warning came from a woman standing beside her idling car, stopped further down the road.

The thought of touching the obviously strangely behaving racoon had not actually crossed my mind. Arguably though, it was good advice given my history of racoons. The last time I tangled with a racoon I came away from the scuffle with a broken arm. True story for another time.

I noticed the woman’s body language too. After she yelled, she drew her hands sharply back like she was touching a hot stove. It is universal body language used to warn others to draw back quickly. We might punctuate the gesture with words or sounds like “gross” or “ewwww”.

I’m not sure why she thought I was about to pick the blessed thing up, or pet it, but I guess she felt the need to warn us. It was likely suffering from a health disorder and people are hard-wired to caution others in their midst to avoid diseases. It’s as much about self-preservation as anything and part of our social behaviour. When we used to roam the earth in small family groups that spent all of their lives in close proximity to each other, if one in the group got sick then others in the group got sick too.

You might want to skip this paragraph if you have a queasy stomach. This behaviour extends even to our gag reflexes. Ever notice (and how couldn’t you!) if someone near you throws up or you smell vomit, it’s all you can do to hold on to your cookies yourself. (Elementary school teachers could likely share some horror stories of class-vomiting.) It’s a reflex to protect the group. If someone in the small group or band had eaten something poisonous or rotten, chances are you did too. So, it’s an early warning system. If one upchucks, everyone in the group should follow suit to get rid of the poison. Ok enough of that talk.

The point is that our natural inclination is to avoid anyone or anything that is sick. The extraordinary exception are those among us who feel the call or duty to move towards people who are ill, to help them. This is really against our own instincts for self-preservation.

Many of our front lawns are festooned with signs thanking these front line workers who really are quite extraordinary in their willingness to risk their own lives for the rest of us.

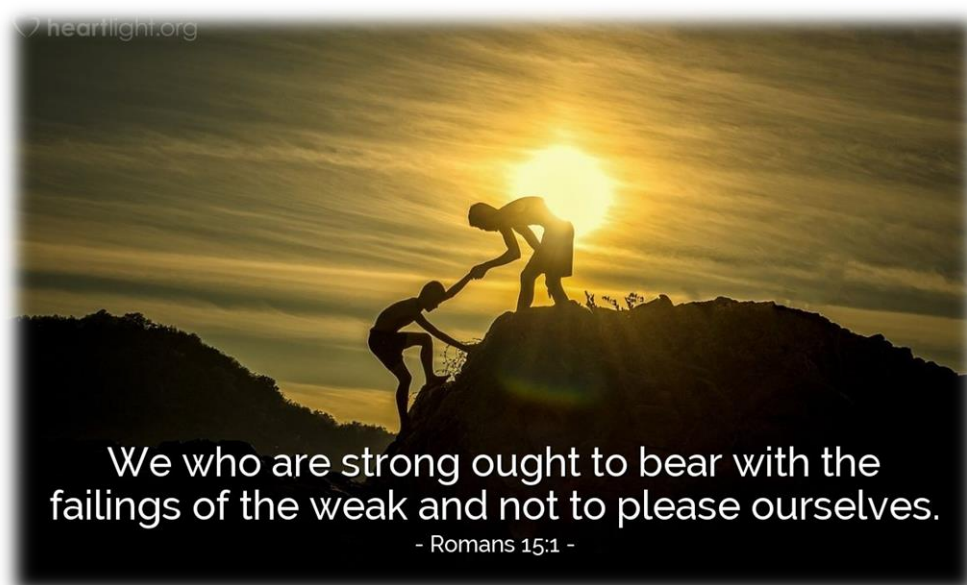
I cannot nearly express, in words, my admiration and love for people who have stepped up in this time of dire need and danger. They really are made of heroic stuff. They include nurses (like my mom), doctors, personal support workers, military personnel, police, paramedics, fire fighters, family members and well...any who are at the fore.

In March I heard an interview with a personal support worker from the nursing home in Bobcaygeon. At that point there had been over a dozen deaths and more than half of the workers had contracted the virus too. She said she was about to start her next shift in the home after having only slept for a few hours, in a place apart from her family. She was not about to abandon the dear souls who needed her on that sinking ship.

Most of the history we learned in school was about war and military force. Arguably, the worst expression of our human tendencies. Maybe, but that's not all we are about.

At the heart of the Jesus movement (yeah I know, here he goes...) is the call to embrace the better angels of our nature. Caring for the ones who are ill and outcast in order to heal the whole, makes a better world for all. Wellness, like illness, can be contagious. If we decide that it is acceptable for any among us to be excluded and not cared for, we accept the risk that someday we may also fall into that same tragic category of exclusion. It may sound selfish, but our practice of caring for the most vulnerable ultimately benefits everyone.

To put oneself in harm's way for the good of others is the highest and holiest expression of our humanity. It's the greatest gift we will ever receive from others and rare are those among us with this courage. All I can say is "Thanks be to you and God". You make us better in every way (pun intended).



We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

- Romans 15:1 -