***Ah, But Your Church Is Beautiful***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, April 7

John 13:1-15

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 For as long as I have lived, I have felt powerless when it came to the big global issues of the day. I couldn’t fix them.

 It started, I guess, in grades one and two, when I was taught to sit under my desk, in case of nuclear attack.

 There is nothing that can make you feel quite as useless and helpless as sitting under a desk, waiting for the bomb, when you are seven years old.

 Along with the bomb the other big issue that I felt powerless to do anything about, growing up, was the environment. The Cayuga River caught fire in 1969 when I was twelve. Then there was Love Canal. Air pollution. Acid rain. The death of the cod stock. Plastic in the oceans. Climate Change.

 And, a whole host of other issues have always made me feel powerless, too: racism and xenophobia, famine, poverty, addiction, terrorism, and violent crime in the streets.

 I’m just one person. I don’t have great wealth or power. I’m just a string of numbers on millions of big data spread sheets. I often feel emasculated. Powerless. Ineffective.

 So, what do we do? How do we prevent our overwhelming sense of not being able to change the world from totally discouraging us?

 Now, I don’t want to suggest that I have the only or best answer to this pressing question. But I have one answer. It is embodied in a well-known story from *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, by South African novelist Alan Paton.

 Once upon a time the white administrator of the South African township of Bochebela was a man named Mr. Karel Bosman. Bosman was loved by the people of color in Bochebela because he treated them with dignity and justice.

 Then Bosman died. Naturally, the whole population of the township turned out for the funeral. They came to in their best Sunday clothes.

 Unfortunately, the minister of Mr. Bosman's church refused to allow the people of color entrance. Only white people were allowed inside. This caused terrible pain for the people of color in the township of Bochebela.

 And this refusal confirmed young blacks in their hatred towards white people.

 The minister to these youth was a Mr. Buti. He told his youth group that they should love their enemies. But one of the young people in his youth group shot back that Jesus said, “love your enemies,” only because Jesus never had to live in Bochabela.

 As it happened, Mr. Buti knew that the chief justice of the South African Supreme Court was a white Christian who sympathized with the blacks, but felt powerless to do anything for them. Every time the chief justice ruled that the apartheid laws were unconstitutional, the government simply rewrote the constitution. Anyway, Mr. Buti told the chief justice about the anger of his young black and colored members, and asked the chief justice to come to his church to help him address that anger. The chief justice agreed, and this is what they did.

 During the service Mr. Buti read the story of how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples—the same story we just read. Then he asked Martha Fortuin to come to the front.

 Martha Fortuin was a very old black woman who thirty years earlier had been the chief justice’s maid. Martha Fortuin had cleaned up all his messes and been a nurse and nanny to all the chief justice’s children. Anyway, when Mr. Buti called her, Martha Fortuin limped slowly, on account of her age and arthritis, to the front of the church where Mr. Buti showed her a chair.

 Then the pastor called out the name of the chief justice of the South African Supreme court. He too walked to the front of the church. Then he took off his coat and wrapped a towel around his waist. The white chief justice then took old Martha Fortuin's shoes off and took her dark, arthritic feet into his hands, gently, because they were tired with much serving, and he washed them. When he was done he dried her feet, and then, in a departure from the script, the chief justice of the South African court kissed her feet.

 And the whole church fell to weeping, including the young people. And when white people asked the judge why he had made such a fool of himself, the judge said it was because he made it his goal to please Jesus. The judge reminded these church-going Boers that Jesus said, "If I, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.”

 So, here is the moral of the story. When we feel powerless to do anything, to change the world, to get rid of apartheid or solve racism, one possibility is that we turn the church into a place that signals, that advertises, that promises what the world could be by being like Jesus.

 There are other answers to the question of powerlessness. When we feel powerless, we could start lobbying groups or nonprofits or join political parties to effect change. When we feel powerless we could volunteer for the North York Food Bank or Doctors Without Borders. We could reuse and recycle. We could post inspirational memes on Facebook or donate to great causes like Camp Scugog or Human Rights Watch.

 There are lots of good things we can do when we feel powerless that will help push this city or nation or even the whole world, inch by inch, in the right direction.

 But what Jesus suggested to his followers, to his embryonic church, on his last night alive with them, was this. Among all the other things you can do to make a difference, why not, in your communal life together, illustrate what I preached?

 Then you will be salt of the earth, a light set on the hill. Then people will sit up and notice and say, “change is possible.”

 Remembering that night, later, Peter described the church a chosen race and a holy nation for proclaiming the acts of Jesus. He said, “conduct yourselves honorably in the world so that they will see your deeds and praise God.”

 Think of Lawrence Park Community Church as an incubator for change. Think of this place as a theatre where together we are rehearsing what we dream for the world. Jesus hoped we would be the beta test version for what the world might look like at its best. We could be advertising brochure for a destination everyone longs to visit.

 Look. Thinking of the church as a preview for what could be isn’t the only answer. I’ve already pointed out that the church is not a panacea for all the world’s problems. But whoever wrote the gospel of John hoped that every congregation would be a test drive for a better world, a just society, a place of hope and healing for us and for the least and the last.

 Why bother trying to keep this church alive for another ten or fifteen years? Why try liturgical dance or have a beautiful choir? Why try to launch a new service to draw in a younger generation? Because by living the dream together we can whet everyone’s appetite for the dream.

 The church—Lawrence Park Community Church—can embody, today, the values, actions, and dreams for the world as it should be. We are having an adventure together to make a difference everywhere. Because are not powerless; because we can.