

St James United Church

MESSAGE FOR – AUGUST 22, 2021



“The Eternal Now” - Preached by: Rev. James Ravenscroft

August 22, 2021 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Excerpt from *Across that Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America* by John Lewis with Brenda Jones; John 6:56-69

After many weeks, we come to the climax of John 6. Jesus watches as many disciples walk away because his teaching is too difficult. He turns to his closest companions, wondering if they'll do the same. Peter replies, “You have the words of eternal life. You're the Holy One of God.” These are not words of reassurance to Jesus, but a statement of faith of John's community, an assertion that what they discovered in “the Way” of Jesus was worth making the hard decision to not walk away even though not long before John wrote his gospel, Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue and so lost their families, community, the spiritual identity they'd grown up with.

So what message was worth losing everything that they'd known? Contrary to what I've heard at many inter-church services, I don't believe it was that those who believe in him are saved when they die. The eternal life of the Christian message was originally much more “now” focused than on a heavenly future. In their experience of Jesus, his followers discovered how much love God has for us, in fact the whole universe. I'm not referring to his death, but his life. Unlike what Solomon prayed, God will dwell on earth. After all, right before Solomon spoke, the glory of God filled the Temple sanctuary. Heaven can't contain God, let alone a building, but not because God disparages creation. Just the opposite. God filled the sanctuary because God always does that. In meeting Jesus, his followers felt they were in God's presence. Again, despite what I have heard other preachers say, I don't believe uniquely so. People experienced God profoundly in him because if we're attentive, we'll discover God is both hidden and revealed everywhere.

For me, this ties back not just to the assertion that Jesus is God's Holy One, but that he is bread from heaven. This statement made more sense after his death when his disciples shared meals and in this felt that he was with them, present, holding them together, giving them much needed courage to continue in his name. But that experience of him present in communion is part of a broader reality of the world as an embodiment of God. In the Prologue of John, we read how in Jesus they experienced the Word made flesh. Now in our text, Jesus says flesh is useless, but spirit gives life. I don't think he means this oppositionally. Instead, I hear him inviting us to open our eyes to spirit that brings life to flesh, to look past what we see and to sense with our hearts. In this everything is sacrament, God's life present through the ordinary, joined to us out of love.

Recognizing this is to glimpse eternal life. It transforms how we see ourselves, our relationships, our world, so that we need to live according to the values of God's reign. Like for

Solomon, this was difficult for people to understand. Perhaps people left Jesus because they had failed to do what he did and spend time alone with God. I wonder sometimes if that is where the church has failed as well. We've spent many centuries telling people about God rather than creating space for people to meet with God. It's a shame because there is a deep hunger in people to experience just that. Perhaps we can do more of that here, teaching practices like Christian meditation, *lectio divina*, gratitude journaling, contemplative painting, chant, and other forms of meditative music, walking the labyrinth, connecting with God in nature. There are many ways to quiet the noise of our world, of our minds, and to connect with God not in a future heaven but here and now.

When we open our eyes to God within us and others, that awareness begins to change how we treat one another. For example, it reshapes marriage from an institution of gendered dominance to one of mutual support. When I see God in my spouse, everything is sacred in the fleshy and mundane realities of our shared life. We are more likely to treat each other as equals, to see our spouse as an end in themselves, that is as a gift, and not just as a means to an end and so for what they do for us. This is critical when the sexism of broader society is too often expressed at home, a reality that can be present in both opposite-gender and same-gender relationships.

This principle also impacts relationships in the wider community. Jesus' world was very top down. One third of the Roman Empire was enslaved, mostly captured in war or sold because of debt. Many more were landless, beholden to the propertied for work, at risk of being enslaved. While the world has changed in many ways, especially with abolition, we know in our hearts that the attitudes that enabled slavery and indentured work are still there. How else are people in debt bondage, forced to work in mines, farms, sweatshops, or trafficked as domestics or sex workers? How else can people be treated differently based on race, gender, ability or any other difference?

As I continue to be attentive to God all around me, more and more relationships change. I start to question the politics of war, policies that make it so difficult for refugees to get asylum, the ongoing unequal treatment of Indigenous peoples, the economics of factory farming as well as the extraction of fossil fuels. Don't get me wrong. I know we need to live. But there are more sustainable and humane approaches that become critical when I open my eyes and see not just other people but all life, animals, plants, the whole earth as sacred. Which means, so is the so-called enemy. I have no choice but to take to heart the wisdom of the late John Lewis, once US representative and civil rights activist, and "hold only love, only peace in [my] heart." That doesn't mean we don't act, but we need to choose confrontation wisely, to stand against injustice but not use violence to end violence or seek to bring unity while excluding others. If God is truly everywhere and in everyone, we seek change in a way that affirms everyone's worth. We again look to Jesus as our model, reaching out in love and even including his betrayer in his circle.

If we are to take our cue from Jesus by living as he did, may we start with opening our eyes to God not just in ourselves or loved ones but in our neighbour, enemy, everyone, and everything. It will mean changing how we live, a path that begins when we change how we see the world. Amen.