

St James United Church

MESSAGE FOR – AUGUST 8, 2021



“From Fear to Trust” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

August 8, 2021 - Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Ephesians 4:25-5:2 ; John 6:35-40 and 51; “Trust” by Thomas R. Smith

As I shared earlier in the service, I find myself feeling a mixture of emotions as we begin this new pastoral relationship. I am, of course, excited. Everything is new and different. There will be challenges but mostly opportunities as we embark on this adventure. Yet these same things give rise to a certain amount of fear. After all, everything's new and different. As Heather said, I “come from away”. Glen is a Newfoundlander, so I've visited this island many times, but it's usually for a couple of weeks and always in the summer.... I pray “Snowmageddon” was a once in a hundred years event. Because I'm a mainlander, I ask advance forgiveness for inevitable blunders, and for some indulgence as I ask why things are done as they are. I do come with the potential gift of fresh eyes, but I promise not to assume a difference in how things are done is anything but a difference. Of course, mainlanders promise that all the time, then do otherwise. Hence, the fear. But for the most part I am excited and pray this is the start of something great.

As I pondered the gospel text for today, excitement and fear seemed apt descriptions for what the crowd felt. Again, excitement is understandable. As we heard in the last couple of weeks, the people came out to see Jesus in large part because they were amazed at how such a big crowd was fed. As he observed, they were there for a repeat performance. But I can only imagine how that initial excitement got mixed up with other feelings like fear as they tried to make sense of who, or what, Jesus was. What if he really was from above as he said? What could it mean? Perhaps it was fear that motivated the leaders a little later than what we heard today to discount Jesus because they knew who his parents were, and as we will hear a couple of weeks from now for many of his followers to abandon him because his teaching is just too hard.

It's a shame because Jesus was inviting them to come to see who God is in a deeper way, to see that God was once again breaking into their experience of hurt and oppression and promising to once again set them free. But God was freeing them in a way that was counterintuitive. For so long they had seen themselves as set apart, and so, freedom should mean that the Romans, their most recent conquerors, would be cast out of their land, and if God should expand their territory in the process, all the better. But in Jesus, God was bringing about a liberation that overturned this perpetuation of “us and them” thinking and instead inviting them into a deep unity, such that even their enemy would have a place at the table. Jesus makes this clear as he says he will not drive away anyone who comes to him, that he'll lose nothing of what God gave him. For some that too must have engendered fear. Their power was based on some being “in” and others “out”.

If we're honest, the world still works that way, and that is the source of much conflict, inequity, hurt. But as Jesus' ongoing presence in the world, the church is called to offer an alternative to the ongoing "us and them" dynamic of our world and be a community where everyone has a place at the table, where everyone's hunger is satisfied, especially the yearning to be seen, to be heard, to belong. That is the vision that you affirm as you gather each Sunday. It is a powerful witness and one that has the possibility of transforming our corner of God's kingdom, as we make sure everyone's welcome, from as close as across the road or as far afield as Paradise.

It is not easy being a community that seeks unity in a world that thrives on division, despite the solidarity what we see each Olympic games. Which is why the author of Ephesians (likely a later disciple of Paul) offers such strong words about the values we are called to live out. Now I don't know you yet, but I suspect if you are like any other congregation that I've had the honour to serve, the author's words ring true – there can be anger at times and divisive talk. But you are more than that, and so his call to forgive one another and seek reconciliation in all that you do also rings true. That is how we are members of one another, expressing the same love Jesus did, not just on the cross, but rather in the way his death was the culmination of how he lived his life.

And so, we are called to let go of ourselves, our assumptions and agendas in order to make space for each other, to listen before speaking, letting go of "our" solutions, even if they come with good intentions, so that we may truly hear without judgement, with an ear to understanding. And as you well know, this is our call not just within a closed "in-house" group but looking outward in open-hearted love for our neighbours. We are to walk the roads of this community, eyes not just open to where needs may be but attentive to where the Spirit is already at work and discerning where we can come along side what others are doing. These are qualities of a baptized community, expressed in words like "marked" and "sealed". So, it is an invitation for St. James United to keep being a witness of unity and love in this corner of St. John's.

That's how I hear the readings this morning. And if that's the case, then ultimately, we're being invited to come alongside what God has always been up to in the world – bearing new life, drawing creation together in justice and with love – and to see how we can best respond in our context. In this we are being invited to trust. Trust is the core of Jesus' message to his disciples as he promises that God is with them, that he'll be with them, nurturing them in love. Trust is more than something you promise. It is something you feel when you know you're seen, heard, belong. Trust says I know others have my back, that I have theirs, and that we will look after one another. Thankfully, trust is the antidote to fear.

So, as much as I feel excited, and a bit afraid as we begin working together, more importantly I feel trust, the same trust I felt when I submitted an application to your Search Committee, trust that it is the Spirit that has brought us together. I pray that we'll continue to trust her leading in the years to come. And as importantly, that we will trust each other and everyone that we meet along the way of this shared adventure we are on. Amen.