

St James United Church



MESSAGE FOR – AUGUST 15, 2021

“The Way of Wisdom” - Preached by: Rev. James Ravenscroft

August 15, 2021 - Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Kings 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Over the years it's become my custom to go for a walk in a forest, by a river, anywhere in nature really, before writing my sermon. I've been on the hunt for a good spot and this week settled on Rennie's River Trail and part of the Riverdale to Mundy Pond Link. As you'd expect, there were of lots “hellos” and “good days” along the way. At one point I saw a couple get out of a car. Noticing that one of them was getting a prayer rug out of the trunk, I offered to him a cheerful “As-salaam alaikum”. He smiled and commended me on my pronunciation. I trust that in the welcoming spirit of Newfoundlanders, any of you would have done the same. Sadly, that is not always the case. Not long ago a Muslim family was run down in London, a reminder that the long told Canadian belief that we don't have a problem with racism is a myth, a reality underscored by the surge in anti-Asian violence at the start of the pandemic, plus the large protests following the death of George Floyd highlighting people's experience of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.

I share these opposing realities because they highlight for me a tension in our readings from First Kings and Ephesians as they contrast the way of the wise with that of the world. Ephesians does this with word play around spirit, suggesting that rather than become drunk on too much wine, or too many spirits, we should seek something more heavenly, becoming intoxicated through prayer and other spiritual practices. First Kings reveals the contrast further as Solomon dreams he asks God for wisdom rather than wealth or long-life. I believe he did so based on his father's downfall when at the height of his power, and his hubris, he forced himself on Bathsheba, and then when she told him of her pregnancy, plotted her husband's death so that he could marry her. King David committed one sin in order to cover up another. Solomon knew he could not fall into the trap of worldly power like his dad had done. He knew that he needed to rule differently.

And he did, legendarily known for his discernment. He looked heavenward to God's values when he made decisions. If we're not sure what those were, consider the gospel as Jesus reminded the people how God fed their ancestors manna. If you recall,

manna was a flaky substance found on the ground each morning. They were to gather only enough for the day. If they took more, except miraculously in preparation for the Sabbath, any extra would spoil. The experience of being fed manna was a lived alternative to the economics of Egypt. It was a model of sharing, of taking only what was needed, and trusting that together there'd be enough. I don't need to explain this model to you. Cooperative living is hardwired into Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

That is one of the reasons Glen and I were eager to move here rather than stick it out in the GTA where we see the main model that's lived out in much of our world, an economics of dominance that presumes one group needs to be on top, with all the privileges that come with that status, and everyone, or thing, there to keep that position. We see this in all the "isms" that bring so much hurt and injustice in the world - racism, sexism, classism, unfettered capitalism, the last, if we are honest, the root cause of greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental concerns. The recent IPCC report is a stark warning that we need to act now and start sharing again, to shift to the "take only what you need" model if the planet is to be liveable for us and for other species.

The way of wisdom lived out when the people were fed manna, that Solomon wanted to base his leadership on, is possible when we shift our narrative about who we are to one another. It doesn't work if we see only competitors in other people. Instead, we need to see our connection. This is why Jesus offers to feed us with himself. It is tempting to focus on what he means by eating flesh and drinking blood. That has got us into trouble as Christians, letting what we believe about the Lord's Supper, communion, Eucharist, whatever you want to call it, become a source of division when its whole purpose and meaning is to bring unity. That is falling into the trap of the world. Instead, the path of wisdom invites us to look at the text again. When I did, I noticed something when I dropped the words "eat" and "drink". What are you left with? "Flesh" and "blood". We know what it means to be "flesh and blood". It means to be family. Jesus wants us to be part of him, to share in him the same depth of connection to God that he shares. As his followers, he feeds us like a mother so that we can be joined as God's children, connected as a family - all races, genders, creeds, ages, abilities, cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, and circumstances.

This is always who we were to be. And while sadly, in our history the church bought into the world's narrative of dominance and division, we know in our bones, in our flesh and blood, that church is at its best when we try to reflect God's values and empower others, be it in the open table where we worry more about someone's yearning to belong than what they believe, or in an openness to our neighbours, looking beyond these walls to see where needs may be and how we can best respond. I heard a powerful expression of this in a church in Nashville. It was located in a part of town where folks were in need of

space. Some needed space to set up small businesses, while others needed a quiet place to study so they could finally finish high school. Some didn't need space but access to Wi-Fi to look for work. The church had all this, plus folks who could act as mentors. They took Jesus at his word, that he was going to feed them with himself, which for them meant sharing their space and amenities to help their neighbours to help themselves. They were really being church. It makes me wonder what we may be called to do in our context.

When we live this way, be it as individuals, as neighbourhoods, as church, we are walking the way of wisdom, where we're as free with an "As-salaam alaikum" as a "good day", where we share, where ultimately, we act as one family, empowering one another rather than exercising power over others. If we live this way, we are not just being church, we just may save the planet. Amen.