

St James United Church

Message for September 5, 2021
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost



“A Place at the Table” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: James 2:1-9,12-17; Mark 7:24-30; Excerpt from Robin Wall-Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Consider this scenario. You are going out with your friend and they decide to bring you to their family’s for dinner. When you arrive, it’s clear that you weren’t expected. The host greets you with a smile but they actually look a bit anxious. The table is set with fine china and crystal, at each place there’s a card, names written in beautiful calligraphy. The host hastily finds a chair, squeezes in another setting, writes your name on some scrap paper. You sit down to eat but the conversation is strained. So how do you feel? What do you do?

Consider another scenario. This time as you arrive with your friend the host ushers you in, introducing you warmly. There are lots of people laughing and singing. Not long after, more people come. The table isn’t set with dishes. It’s a make-shift bar and buffet. This is no formal meal but a kitchen party. How do you feel this time? What do you do?

When I think of Jesus, especially when he is in someone’s home, I picture the second scenario. This is the man chastised for eating with “sinners” after all. But today feels much more like the first. His initial refusal to heal the woman’s daughter is quite troubling. Dogs as a term used for non-Jews in that time is like a white person using the “N-word” today. It’s shocking to hear Jesus say this, especially since this woman needs help. And it is also hypocritical given that one, he isn’t in Jewish territory, and two, he just pushed back on the Pharisees’ defence of religious tradition. Wasn’t avoiding Gentiles part of the same concern about purity? Thankfully in holding her own, flipping his argument in favour of her daughter, she helped him change his mind. And in the process his mission became more inclusive.

As we look to James, it’s clear that despite Jesus’ own conversion, it could be a challenge to live out the kitchen-party inclusiveness that I associate with him. Though in Paul’s letters broad inclusion seems to be a defining goal of Christian community, customary barriers between groups needing to fall away if they were to be truly one in Christ, James understood that he needed to challenge his fellow followers of Jesus for the tendency to play favourites, especially when it came to the rich. He was underscoring how the Christian community wasn’t to be a reflection of the society that was, but of the reign of God that they sought to reveal in the world. That would never be the case as long as some clearly had greater power than others.

James’ letter should challenge us too. It may not be the wealthy who carry influence at St. James but if we’re honest there will be one group or another that does. One way to look at this is to ask who used to be present but is now missing, be it from one aspect of the congregation

or are gone altogether. People pull away when they don't feel seen, feel their opinions don't carry weight. If this happens, we need to reach out, listen with an aim to understand the other person's viewpoint, and in the process create space for healing to begin. Another question to consider is who is missing from the neighbourhood. I find this area to be an interesting part of St. John's. As I walk here, I see how ethnically and racially diverse it is. We are also by the university. Across the street are young families. Behind us is a high school. Down the road are folks from Indigenous communities with loved ones in hospital. How are we reaching out?

This needs to be asked. Inclusion is part of your identity. After all, you voted overwhelmingly to become an Affirming Ministry. This presumes that you've done good work looking at attitudes and practices that excluded others. Plus you have an Affirming Vision Statement to look to as a reminder to keep doing that. Ideally we'd print it on the bulletin both as a reminder and a pledge to anyone visiting or worshipping the first time. Being Affirming is a powerful witness not just of your desire to reflect the inclusive nature of the gospel but your understanding of the need to be advocates in the community. This province has come along way in recent years in accepting LGBTQ+ folks (Glen and I wouldn't be here otherwise) but there's still discrimination. And as you know there is sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, that is, there is still the favouritism James wrote about. We know that isn't God's hope for the world. So we are called to rehearse within these walls a more inclusive world by being intergenerational, intercultural, inter faith (including those without), inclusive of all identities, sexualities, viewpoints, ideas.

This call to inclusion is one of the reasons that each Sunday I say welcome in an Indigenous language (today in Mi'kmaq), then in one to reflect the diversity of the community (today in Bangla). Thank you for your openness to this. I remember introducing this to a congregation, along with singing hymns in non-English languages. They were hesitant, saying we needed to wait for there to be speakers of this or that language. Apart from the fact that there already were people at worship who spoke languages other than English, they were reinforcing the preferential treatment of English speakers, like the wealthy in today's portion of James. They struggled to place themselves in the shoes of a new worshipper, to see the impact of feeling welcome from the outset rather than a place at the table only being set after the fact. They also couldn't see the opportunity they were giving up in being exposed to various languages, prayer styles, musical rhythms. Nurturing a more inclusive world begins in our minds, hearts, souls.

In the end it is about mutuality as Wall-Kimmerer notes. Like for berries, we are to be attentive to the needs of people and tend to one another with respectful care and attention, be it seniors, young families, international students, new Canadians, young adults, LGBTQI+ folks, people from other faith traditions, the neurodiverse, 40-somethings. Whatever the group, we hold their well-being close to our hearts, creating space that anticipates and responds to needs. When we give from the heart in this way, we're tending our own hearts, and living out of Jesus' heart.

When we do that, the church can be the kitchen party it was always supposed to be, and so a witness of God's hope for the world, where everyone will flourish because there's a place for everyone at the table. May it be so. Amen.