

St James United Church

Message for September 19, 2021
The Second Sunday in Creation Time



“Listen, Learn and Let Go”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: “What She Can Teach You” by Steve Garnaas-Holmes; James 3:13-18; Mark 8:27-35

As we continue the Season of Creation, I’d like to pick up from last Sunday’s message in which I referenced the awe I felt watching Hurricane Larry. We often think of awe in terms of praising God. We look out over the vast ocean, watch the dance of the northern lights, stand beneath a towering redwood. Awe leads to praise. In some denominations, “wonder and awe” is considered a gift of the Spirit, along with wisdom, knowledge, understanding, courage, counsel and piety. As we face multiple ecological crises, we’re going to need all these gifts, but I believe the one we need the most is the most forgotten – piety.

Piety is the most forgotten, and most misunderstood. We tend to think it refers to spiritual practice – religious observance, saying prayers, going to church, and such. We similarly misunderstand righteousness, making it about spiritual purity when it’s a biblical synonym for social justice. Piety is reverence. It begins with seeing something as a gift. It’s the spiritual opposite of awe and wonder. Awe often begins with the large; but reverence pays attention to the small. Further to this, piety and righteousness go together. Our reverence for someone or thing motivates us to care for and protect them.

This connection between reverence and care is one of the reasons I love Forest Church, or Wild Church as it’s also called. There is a good article about the Wild Church Movement in this month’s edition of “Broadview”. I’m happy Susan Sheppard began one here. I led a Wild Church in Richmond Hill, and it was spiritually very rich for me. People gathered outdoors, not to do the same as we do in a church building, though there are commonalities, but prayed outside aware that God is there too. Its aim is participating with God in nature, trusting that God’s wisdom is near at hand if we’re attentive. It recognizes a truth taught by Indigenous peoples and long part of Christian tradition - creation is a source of revelation, the first testament before we needed sacred teaching to be written down either in Torah or Gospel. Jesus understood this as he took time in nature, prayed in secluded places, drew on teachings he received, such as observing wheat and birds and wildflowers.

This is the core idea in the poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a now-retired United Methodist pastor. He captures what I’ve experienced. We can learn much watching a river, taking time to be present to a bird. A practice I like to do as part of Wild Church is at times called *sensio divina*. Like *lectio divina*, that is reading a bible passage with an openness to what God may be saying through a word or phrase that grabs your attention, *sensio divina* is being attentive to what you sense in a natural setting, open to what God may be saying in the lichen on tree bark, or a colony of ants working at your feet, or to a grove of trees. I remember a time I sat with a black walnut tree. It was quite old, toward the end of its life, and there were many

saplings near it. My dad had died recently but being with the tree helped me let him go, knowing he'd given me what he could, and it was my turn to grow. I realize that to some of you that may sound like just my imagination, but you could say the same for the sense of direction you get praying with scripture. In both, you choose to trust that the wisdom you have received has come from above, from a divine source. The fruit of the prayer is key. If it comes with a sense of peace, then I can trust it is the Spirit speaking through my imagination.

Sadly, we don't take time to be in nature let alone to reverently pray while we are there. I believe this disconnect is fueling the ecological crises we face. Why protect what we no longer know, no longer sense God's presence in. In Genesis, the first humans were aware of God's presence in the garden, but after eating from the tree of knowledge, they hid from God. Then, after being banished from Eden, Cain murdered his brother and humanity was caught in a downward spiral. While not historical, the story reminds us of what happens when we lose sight of our place in the web of creation, thinking we can call the shots in God's place. In a modern view, God is sometimes viewed as a watchmaker that set the universe in motion then left us to our own devices. Our world is the result of this mechanistic perspective. We no longer listen for God speaking in creation, in the animals, plants, rivers and ocean. The Earth is seen as a resource to be bought and sold and we treat one another the same way. James warns us that our worldly approach will lead to selfishness, conflict, even death.

We know in our hearts that this is a dead-end path, that instead we need to reconnect with God, each other, and the Earth. This is Jesus' fundamental message, which is why Peter asserted that Jesus was the Messiah, the expected one. But Peter failed to understand with his mind what he intuited in his heart. When Jesus drew on what he learned in the wilderness to teach that like the grain of wheat he too would have to die to bear fruit, Peter got defensive. He framed Jesus' role in terms of worldly glory and power. Jesus rightly called him out. And then he invited them all to get behind him, to follow his lead if they were to let go of the ways of the world, ways that lead to ever greater conflict and self-destruction to instead walk a path that leads to abundant life.

Friends, he continues to lead, showing us we need to put future generations first, even though it means making sacrifices in the present, to accept the cross in pursuit of righteousness, of social justice, and in our time ecological justice too. James spoke of this as the way of wisdom that gives way for others in gentleness. In our time this means living more gently on the Earth, giving way for our fellow creatures as well as future generations. It means accepting a cross of sorts if we're to cut carbon emissions in order to keep global temperature rise to no more than 1.5° C. Some examples include parking our cars and taking public transit; shifting from oil to electric heat (it may cost more); switching from animal to vegetable protein more often (that is actually cheaper); encouraging local food production, eating in season (we ate fruitcake not strawberries at Christmas for a reason), building smaller, more sustainable houses and living closer together (in other words living more like we used to). In the long run these sacrifices will lead to a more abundant life, helping beat social and spiritual isolation, making us more connected, and restoring community, including the community of the Earth.

At the core of all this stands piety, that is reverence, treating the world around us as a gift and doing what we can to protect it. In this we take our cue from Jesus, not just sacrificing himself in love, but in listening attentively to God and the earth to discern how we can live in a more just, gentle, and peaceful world. Jesus led the way. May we get behind him and follow. Amen.