

St James United Church

Message for October 3, 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Creation Time
and World Communion Sunday



“From Compassion to Unity” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Amos 5:6-7; 10-15; Mark 9:38-43; 49-50; Excerpt from *Earth, Our Original Monastery: Cultivating Wonder and Gratitude through Intimacy with Nature* by Christine Valters Paintner

Perhaps I was sitting with Amos and Mark for too long, but I have to say the older I get, the more I need “World Communion Sunday” and days like it. I am starting to despair for humanity. Now, I still have some hope. Like last Sunday as I looked out and saw many of you wearing orange. I thought, “Well done. They get why this is important.” Or as I watched the news on Thursday and saw lots of people learning about residential schools. But then I read how our Prime Minister started holidays on the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. I shook my head. I wonder if Jesus despaired too, especially as one of his closest friends interrupted him, a child still on his knee, as he explained how they needed to be compassionate servants of all. Did Jesus shake his head while John tried to deflect from his teaching about service and compassion by complaining about people who showed others some compassion?

We need compassion more than ever, along with wonder, reverence, open-mindedness – values we’ve reflected on these last few weeks. This call to compassion didn’t start with Jesus, despite the sometime claim that the god of the Old Testament is one of wrath compared to the loving god of the gospel. That uses the “us-them” thinking at the heart of John’s deflection. Compassion is at the core of Amos’ prophecy, even if it seems wrathful at first. Israel was about to be invaded because they’d ignored the poor, in fact, made their situation worse rather than tend the needs of the whole community. Jesus sounds wrathful too as he says we’d be better off amputating a hand than be cast in the fire of Gehenna. Like Amos, Jesus was calling them to care for the most vulnerable, but he needed to shock them to see how mired they’d become in the mindset of the Roman Empire all too willing to sacrifice others to hold to power. He reminded them of the past, Gehenna once the site of child sacrifice, likely to the Canaanite god of rain and fertility, in other words, the god of prosperity.

In some ways we see the same willingness to sacrifice children and other vulnerable people in our time. More than one government has spoken about having a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous communities but not lived it out. For example, our federal government kept going to court rather than compensate Indigenous children placed into foster care because of underfunding of support services. Likewise, Ottawa, along with the province, didn’t consult with the Innu Nation regarding the rate mitigation deal for Muskrat Falls. This is part of a long-term pattern of both governments regarding Innu and Inuit in Labrador, be it the building of Churchill Falls, moving the village of Davis Inlet in the 40’s, or early development of the mine at Voisey’s Bay. Commitments are made to free, prior and informed consent but it seems not to be done if

it is going to stall economic development. A similar example concerns ongoing construction of oil and gas projects despite global rise in temperature from CO₂ and methane emissions. Most of the world's population lives in areas that will be impacted by sea-level rise. Unlike wealthier countries that can build dikes, berms and other mitigating measures, the poorest of the world will be flooded, creating more refugees than we've ever known. Add to this that with rising temperatures, countries in the tropics will have difficulty growing their own food. We know this and yet oil and gas companies keep pushing new projects. Thankfully, more individuals and organizations are starting to divest from fossil fuels, a boon not just for the most vulnerable of the world but for the needs of the world as one community.

We need to consider the whole world, and that includes people in positions of power. I admit that as I began this reflection, I lacked compassion for our PM. Too often a hardened attitude backfires, the judgement of others further entrenching the one being judged. We see this in people who refuse to be vaccinated and it holds true on environmental and other issues too. I'm sure that Jesus won John over not just with strong words about limbs but with compassion. After all John went from judging those not in the group to preaching the uniting power of love.

Perhaps Jesus had compassion for John because he had it for himself, cultivated by many hours in prayer. As Christine Valters Paintner reminds us, in contemplation, we let go of ego, of the divisions we make with our minds, and see that we are part of a connected whole – vulnerable and powerful, wealthy nations and the Global South, Indigenous peoples and settlers, human and other than human – one world. Any practice that helps us become aware of our thoughts and feelings helps in this. Key is that we learn to be compassionate with ourselves which in turn helps us to be more open toward others. Rev. angel Kyodo Williams describes it this way: "The way to get to this place of openness and compassion is to practice opening more and more to yourself. All of yourself. The rough, unrefined parts as well as the areas you are proud of.... The practice of meditation helps us call on the gentle 'watcher' inside us who views all the contradictions that make us who we are without judging any of it." As we focus, a thought comes up, but we simply acknowledge it. As we do so we come to deeper self acceptance. Then in the wholeness we feel, we offer the same to others. Through mutual compassion we cultivate the one world at the very heart of God's Reign.

Friends, I began by saying I need days like World Communion Sunday to give me hope, but I may just need communion. Like meditation, sharing this sacrament is a spiritual practice that draws us together in compassion and care. We think of it as an individual practice in which we are spiritually fed. But it's profoundly communal, as we're joined to each other, anyone sharing communion wherever they are, with everyone who has shared the sacrament before and will in the future, with all of creation present in bread and wine. As we celebrate this unity, we also make present the future for which we long, overcoming "us-them" attitudes to be one world.

And so though I feel frustrated with the world, I have hope, a hope born from the compassion Jesus modelled, that we offer each other and ourselves. I saw that hope in people wearing orange, feel it in the care more and more people show other creatures. May we find ways to cultivate compassion. As we do, we'll cultivate the unity that is God's Reign. Amen.