

# St James United Church

Message for October 10, 2021

Thanksgiving Sunday and  
the Fifth Sunday in Creation Time



“The Grace of Gratitude” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Joel 2:21-27; Mark 10:17-27; “When Giving Is All We have” by Alberto Rios

Of the two main turkey holidays, I prefer Thanksgiving. Surprising, I know. Most people prefer Christmas. I could blame the pumpkin spice propaganda, or my dislike of cold weather (I know, what were we thinking moving to Newfoundland). The truth is, I like how Thanksgiving is less commercialised, the pumpkin push excepted. It seems more focused on family and given that spending time with Glen's family is a big reason why we moved here you can guess that I was looking forward to our first Thanksgiving on the island. Sadly, family plans unravelled, and we are on our own this year. Before you feel sorry for us, it's for the best. Glen's from Central, and the COVID-19 numbers were making me nervous. I feel more at ease with the low-key plans we've made. Ironically, I'll have to lay my expectations for family get-togethers on Christmas.

There's also a spiritual gift in our altered plans, one that relates to today's readings as well as holiday. You may assume I mean harvest, after all Joel 2 speaks of bounty. But we need to back up to the context of the prophecy. The community was faced with a drought followed by a locust infestation, not unlike what happened in Southern Alberta this summer. In response they were to call a fast and turn their hearts back to God. The restoration in today's reading was contingent on that. We feast at Thanksgiving but do so in the context of gratitude, which includes an attitude of letting go of, rather than clinging to, what we have, or for me this weekend, what I expected. I need to be open to whatever the day's going to be, a gift to appreciate rather than to control.

I'm sure you noticed the opposite dynamic in the gospel. Shocked at Jesus' call for him to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and follow him, the man sadly walked away, prompting Jesus to say it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a wealthy person to enter God's Reign. I don't believe Jesus was judging him, as if his refusal to divest his possessions threatened his soul. He'd asked Jesus about eternal life but for Jesus, eternal life wasn't about a future heaven but this world reshaped by love, compassion and justice. That includes accepting where the man was at even as Jesus invited him to consider another view.

That being said, the man would have to wait for a future heaven because his reluctance held him back from seeing the world as Jesus did. His difficulty may have stemmed from how enmeshed he was in the Roman system. He likely owned enslaved people (often sold into slavery because of high tax debt), and the family farms of other people (who became wage labourers on their land again because of their debt). He clung to what he owned because he benefitted from a worldview that put him above, and in control of, others, members of his own

nation. He was faithful to some of what Torah taught. But Jesus wanted him to go further and enact the principle of Jubilee, where every fifty years the enslaved were to be freed, any land-holdings returned to the original owners, the land itself left fallow so it too could be restored. The law was practical, ensuring wealth didn't accumulate in an increasingly small number of families, thus preserving the original flat socioeconomics of the Twelve Tribes. And it was spiritual, a reminder that everything is gift, that it comes from and so belongs to God.

That premise is key to the Reign of God that Jesus invited the man to embrace. While he was not able to do as Jesus asked, last Monday was the feast-day of someone who did, Francis of Assisi, and it changed everything. The son of a prosperous silk merchant, Francis increasingly grew disillusioned by his life of comfort, and the exploitation of others. He embraced a life of poverty and serving those in need, animals included. His decision reformed his experience of the world and so reshaped how he related to others. He stopped seeing things as objects to use, including other people, instead viewing everything as subjects, that is as gifts in their own right. The same loving God he found in himself, he saw wherever he looked, in those in need, lepers, enemies, animals and plants which he called sisters and brothers. In this he lived out the spirit of Joel's prophecy, the restoration of the community beginning with the soil and plants, and he glimpsed the Reign of God that Jesus invited the wealthy man to see.

This is something that Jesus invites us to glimpse as well, and it is possible when like Francis we approach our lives more open-handedly, seeing the people we know and love as gifts in their own right and not for what they do for us, looking at the animals, plants, land, water and sky in the same way, treating what we "own" not as objects to keep but to use as we need them and also to share with others, especially if they need them more, experiencing each day as gift, open to the moments as they are rather than whether or not they are as we expected or planned, approaching each experience as something to be savoured, from the warm spice of pumpkin pie to the bracing feeling of cold air on your skin. This is the posture of gratitude. It's what this holiday is supposed to be about. Gratitude gives rise to happiness, not the other way around, because as we take time to look for things for which we're grateful, we see them more and more, even when things go wrong. As Alberto Rios reminds us, everything we do is about giving, and we are all better for this being so.

Friends, I began this reflection speaking about my altered Thanksgiving plans. This is something we all know too well as the pandemic continues and holiday routines once more need adjusting. I admit that when our plans needed adjusting, I was disappointed. Then I realized we were getting an us-holiday, the first since my dad, God rest him, moved in with us. The day will be a gift of no stress, no expectations or obligations. As a result we can take time to just give thanks for each other, our relationship, the life we share. I pray that even as we wish for "normal" holidays, you too can take time to appreciate this holiday as it is. For when we approach our lives in a spirit of gratitude, we are more able to see each person, each moment, every animal, plant, patch of land, morsel of food, as a gift, and as we do, we just may glimpse the reign of God. Amen.