

St James United Church

Message for October 17, 2021
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost



“Dying to Live; Liberated to Love”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Heb. 5:1-10; Mark 10:32-45; Excerpt from *A Life of Unlearning* by Anthony Venn-Brown

Here we go again. Once more, Jesus shares with his disciples that his immediate future will bring suffering and death, and two of his friends completely misunderstand him, boldly asking to sit in the power seats with him. If I was him, I'd have quit right then. Thankfully, he's not me and he doesn't quit. He knows that their misunderstanding is part of the process, that they will only grasp his fuller mission, and their part in it, if he gives his life to liberate others.

Liberate is how the Common English Bible translates what is traditionally rendered as ransom. I'm grateful for this. It restores a common use of the word *lytron* in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Torah and other scriptures, when freedom is wrought not just by a price paid but through divine action. Think of what God does for the people through Moses, leading them from slavery in Egypt. Their liberation took the commitment of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, a sacrifice in love and service, but not a life needing to be forfeited. We end up with this interpretation of Jesus' death when people read Jesus' comments about being a servant alongside suffering servant passages in Isaiah. This is getting complicated, I realize. Let it suffice that reading the last verse of our gospel this way flips what Jesus says on its head. The servant in Isaiah suffers as he does so others don't have to. But here Jesus is making clear that he wants his followers to be servants too, to drink the cup he drank, be baptized with his baptism. He embraced all that we are, even accepting to die, not as a citizen and heir, but as an outsider and slave, so we could be all that he is. He wants all of us to share in his identity not just by rising with him but dying with him too.

In this we're called to die to the world and to ourselves. I say both, but at times one aspect takes priority. This is the case for those of us who come out as a sexual or gender minority. Anthony Venn-Brown writes that coming out can seem like a deadly ending when actually it's a liberating beginning. As a former evangelist and founder of Freedom 2 B, a network for evangelicals who identify as LGBTQ+, Anthony knows first hand the lengths we'll go to kill our identity so that it aligns with the expectations of family, friends, church, society. But we end up killing our souls, the opposite of what spiritual growth should be. There needs to be death to self, but it's more of a death of the self-told lie. That was the case for me, trying all through high school to be anything but gay. I ended up becoming a priest, and was guilty of another lie, convinced my struggle with celibacy didn't really matter. I came out to my family but because I was never going to be in a relationship, my parents shelved their feelings. Unlike my brother who insightfully asked if I was becoming a priest because I'm gay. I denied it yet he was right in a way. I'd internalized lots of shame. Then when I met Glen, I was scared to leave ministry,

afraid of judgment, lost reputation, status (I was an up and comer). But the need for integrity, and having the relationship I'd always wanted but didn't think I was worthy of, left me with one option. Leaving ministry. Little did I know what a home I'd find in the United Church instead. I died to a perception of who I am but gained a renewed life and spiritual freedom that allowed me to serve with deep love and joy.

And that is what dying in Christ is supposed to be for any of us. You may not be dying to shame. It may be anger, prejudice, past trauma, self-centredness, loss, any number of things. Whatever it is, the new life that liberates us flows from our most fundamental identity, regardless of gender identity, sexuality, race, culture, belief, ability, that is being a beloved child of God. This is the core of today's passage from Hebrews. We can get caught up in what it says of sacrifice, but the focus is on Jesus' identity as high priest, not by inheritance but God's claim of him as a son and a priest like Melchizedek. It's obscure, I know. Melchizedek was the king and priest who blessed Abraham. We know nothing about him but don't need to other than that he was righteous, not because of any lineage or skill or religion, just being himself, God working in and through him.

And God works through each of us, just as we are. The high priest offers sacrifice to atone for sin, but ultimately our sin is delusion, the false belief we're not worthy of God's love, that we are separated from God, one another, other than human creatures, creation itself. It is the opposite. We're all connected, part of one another. Our "sins" flow from the delusion of separation, doing things to divide ourselves from others, make ourselves feel superior even though fundamentally we're the same. The church judged sexual and gender minorities, demanding we deny our core feelings to fit nothing more than a social norm. But at what cost? Not just to our spiritual lives but physical lives too. Would that we'd been affirmed. Thank goodness for congregations like this one who do just that, enabling each one of us to claim our identity as the beloved of God.

When we see ourselves as we are, we can serve as Jesus invites us to do. As we affirm others as we've been affirmed, it's easy then to respond to people's needs with compassion and genuine care. More than that we can question why their needs aren't met. Given this means challenging vested interests, we may well drink the same cup as Jesus, may share in his baptism. But we do so unafraid of the risk to our lives, because we know who we fundamentally are, know to whom we belong, and so in whose heart we'll finally rest. We can die a final death without fear because we have died many times across our lives, died to self delusion, again and again rising into love and joy.

I'm making it sound easier than it is, I know. Thankfully we aren't alone on this path. We have fellow seekers, mentors and ministers, confidants and encouragers. Christianity is a collective faith, a call into community through baptism. It's why we're here, in person and online, companions in the call to die to self so others can be liberated, so all of us can really live. There may be times we too don't get it, but remember that Jesus took the lead before us, embracing all that we are so we can embrace who we truly are as well. And he still accompanies us on the way. Amen.