

St James United Church

Message for October 24, 2021
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost



“Mind the Gap”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 31:10-14; Mark 10:46-52; “I Worried” by Mary Oliver

If like me you’ve visited London and used the Underground, chances are you saw signs to “Mind the gap” between the platform and the train. You likely also saw on the edge of street crossings notices telling you which way to look. I appreciated that. Being from Canada, I would invariably watch for traffic coming from the wrong direction. More than warnings to watch for possible hazards, these notices were asking me to be conscious of my surroundings differently than I am accustomed to doing.

Fortunately, we don’t only need notices to help us be attentive. Sometimes an experience can shift how we see the world. The last eighteen months have definitely been such for many of us. Sheltering in place made people more aware of what those of us who are older or have mobility challenges experience all the time, especially the loneliness that can come with forced isolation. Outbreaks in care homes made us conscious of how understaffed these facilities can be. The need for wage incentives for essential workers was a reminder of how so many of us work in jobs that provide barely enough for day-to-day basics let alone save for the future, a particularly pressing situation for women and racialized Canadians. Did you know the highest rates of COVID-19 in Toronto were in racially diverse neighbourhoods where folks live in multi-generation households and work at two or more jobs to get by? Without paid sick days, people had to go to work sick or couldn’t get time off to get vaccinated. The reality of low wages has been highlighted again with the difficulty some businesses are having in finding workers, especially in the service industry. This pandemic has forced many of us to see what has been hidden before, often hidden in plain sight.

In this, as much as we want the pandemic to be over, more and more recognize we can’t simply go back to how things were. It’s as if this experience, tragic as it’s been, has also been a moment of grace, like for Bartimaeus whose sight was restored by Jesus. Now in this be assured I’m using blindness as metaphor, in no way equating actual visual impairment with ignorance or any moral lapse. Like how it’s used in “Amazing Grace” which we will sing after this message. The lyric “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see” was penned by John Newton, a slave-ship captain turned abolitionist. The song is about his religious conversion following ardent prayer during a rough storm at sea. His new-found faith wasn’t just about heaven but how we live now. Even then he freely admitted his conversion was a process given that he didn’t break from the slave trade right away. The global economy was enmeshed with slavery, so I’m sure he tried justifying his participation in it at first. He finally had “full sight”, as you may say, when he began to advocate for its abolition.

That's how it is for many of us, like Bartimaeus before Jesus came to Jericho, sitting by the road, unable to imagine another way. We see this in talk about the economy, for example the minimum wage. Long-standing opinion was that a higher wage decreases employment because employers can't afford the same staffing compliment. It's rooted in an old worry that, say, you helping her somehow harms me. It doesn't work that way. Wealth isn't fixed. Instead, as wealth circulates it stimulates more. But the worry has left politicians and economists alike with eyes shut, not wanting to question long-held wisdom. That is, until someone comes along to give us a new perspective, like David Card, recent Nobel Laureate for Economics, who studied the issue and found that unemployment doesn't go up after all. His study has been repeated with the same result, leading some jurisdictions to raise minimum wage and legislate benefits like paid sick leave. And in the long run the higher wage helps employers. Increased job satisfaction increases productivity and lowers staff turnover. But even with this real world evidence, some leaders continue to cling to conventional wisdom.

The same goes for guaranteed liveable income, which the UCC has advocated since 1972. Only now with the need for benefits in the pandemic are people seeing the need for a new approach to eliminating poverty. Similar to the Guaranteed Income Supplement to ensure seniors don't fall into a financial crisis, a guaranteed liveable income is an "income", that is a payment for basic necessities but unlike current programs isn't conditional on employment criteria; is "guaranteed" in that it is available to anyone below a certain income (not paid to everyone then clawed back); and "liveable" so people can truly live, not just stay alive. Trialled in Ontario but cut after the government changed, early reports suggest recipients were healthier, less stressed, could focus on job training, start a business, seek help with issues that perpetuated their situation, and it was simpler and cheaper to manage than what we do now. Likewise, international studies have shown it is affordable and beneficial in terms of health, justice, education, social welfare. The pandemic has shown us many gaps in our social fabric. A guaranteed liveable income is a possible solution.

In this, I see it as one practical way to begin living out the vision of Jeremiah, where the scattered nations are gathered back together, and everyone can share in the bounty that God provides. As I alluded earlier, part of the concern for things like guaranteed liveable income is an increased financial burden on the wealthier of us, forgetting that nothing we own is truly ours but gained through access to natural resources, to our shared heritage. And so, God's Reign is pictured as shifting the current reality so the last can come first and the gifts of the world be shared in peace, a vision rooted in the belief that we're all divinely blessed, Bartimaeus included. That is what Jesus understood and Bartimaeus glimpsed in his heart as his physical sight was restored. It's why he threw off his cloak, stripped of fear and worry, like Mary Oliver able to go into the morning and sing, or John Newton confident in the grace that changed his life. With a fresh perspective, Bartimaeus was able to follow Jesus.

May we too throw off our worries and follow Jesus with renewed vision. During this pandemic we have become increasingly aware of the gaps in our social fabric. As we mind them, may we also mind each other in life-changing ways. Following Jesus means nothing less. Amen.