

St James United Church

Message for October 31, 2021

All Saints / Reformation Sunday



“Reformed and Always Reforming”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Ruth 1:6-18; Psalm 119:1-8; Mark 12:28-34

Five hundred and four years ago today, Martin Luther sent to his bishop ninety-five theses on the nature of authority and salvation. His essay ignited a movement. But rather than spark conversation, church leaders dug in their heels, and so did Luther, convinced as he was that the Bible was the primary authority, not them, and that the primary message of the Bible is that the initiative for our salvation begins with God’s grace, not our effort. As Protestants, we’ve come to accept this position, yet in our gospel this morning, Jesus seems to say the opposite. If the most important commandment is loving God joined to loving neighbour, doesn’t that make our devotion to God the starting point? And given that Jesus and the legal expert were agreed on the commandment’s significance, was Jesus not as at odds with the “works righteousness” of the priests, experts and Pharisees as we tend to think?

Truth is, today’s passage is a bit of an outlier. The rest of the chapter highlights the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Like Luther, Jesus was a reformer, and like for Luther, those in authority didn’t appreciate his critique. Jesus’ response was in line with the legal expert, as it was with other rabbis before him, but when you look at his actions as well as his words, it’s clear he had a broader view of neighbour than most, especially the religious leaders. He ate with tax collectors and “sinners”, blessed lepers, accepted Samaritans and Gentiles as recipients of God’s love. He wasn’t out to lunch here. The Temple had a courtyard for Gentiles, suggesting God’s love isn’t as exclusive as their practice. Plus, God was in the habit of working through Gentiles. Ruth was from Moab, making her not just a foreigner but an enemy. Yet she was the great-grandmother of David, the ideal king and forebear of the messiah. But that didn’t matter in the first century CE. Most people felt that devotion to God included a narrow view of neighbour.

I believe Jesus’ broader definition was based on prayer, personal experience that drew together love of God, neighbour and self. As you will recall, at his baptism, Jesus was claimed as God’s beloved child. I’ve no doubt this identity was reinforced repeatedly when in the depth of his heart he no longer experienced himself but met the same God who named him beloved. He loved God in his neighbour because he recognized the same God in them. Loving God, neighbour, and self - one reality. Ruth’s commitment to Naomi flows from this understanding. Naomi’s people are her people, her God, Ruth’s God, because where God is, we are, and where we are, God is. This calls out to us to eat with “sinners”, be in fellowship with “enemies”, reach out to others with love and a desire to serve.

This experience of God within ourselves and others is what those we call “saints” experienced. For some, the starting point may have been serving others, rather than prayer, an affinity beyond wanting to “help the needy” growing over time. But the end is the same: union with the

God who is beyond and within all things, us included. This is what Jesus wanted us to experience, that, as we hear in John, we be one in God as he was. Reformed Churches speak of being “reformed and always reforming”. It is meant for us as church, but we can seek the same personally, to grow in God in whose image and likeness we are said to have been created. This is the fundamental experience of blessing.

I wonder if this is what Luther intuited when he said salvation begins with God even though his theology, like the other reformers, jumped over that first blessing and focused on our “fall”. That is unfortunate because starting with the negative has meant that we approach God from fear and not love. We end up assuming the worst of ourselves and others. We may glimpse a bit of God in our heart, perhaps in those “like us”, but like the religious leaders battling Jesus, we really limited it. We wanted to control “sinners” rather than empower people to experience God as Jesus did. The result is a trajectory of Christianity I first heard expressed by Richard Rohr. He suggests that Jesus wanted us to experience being God’s beloved, an experience which as I said changes how we treat each other and can reshape our world. But as the Jesus movement extended into Greece, it turned into a philosophy, then in Rome it became an organized religion. By the time of Luther, it was a culture, resulting in, among other things, church run residential schools as a way to assimilate Indigenous people. In North America it became a business. This history makes a lot of sense to me, but the result is a diluted purpose making us increasingly irrelevant in the wider society.

I don’t think it has to stay this way. If we’re “reformed and always reforming” why can’t we be an experience again. In that case we have two tasks: helping people grow in prayer and finding ways for people to serve others and seek justice in our world. In both we create space for an encounter with God in our hearts and everyone else’s. If we do, we will live out the command to love God, neighbour, and self, and as we celebrate today, help everyone be a saint.

I can’t speak of Christianity being an experience if I don’t offer one, so let me end with a spiritual practice.. This prayer takes to heart being created in God’s image. As I slowly share “Blessing the Body” by Jan Richardson, a United Methodist minister, listen deeply, in your heart and in your body.

This blessing
takes one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.
Holy face.
Holy feet.
Holy everything
in between.

Holy even in pain.
Holy even when weary.
In brokenness, holy.
In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.
Holy in distress.
Holy when being born.
Holy when we lay it
down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,
open your eyes
(holy eyes).

For one moment
see what this blessing
sees,
this blessing
that knows
how you have been
formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you —
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

May we delight in these words, knowing we are beloved, graced as saints. May this knowledge transform how we see ourselves and one another, reshaping all that we are and all that we do.
Amen.