

St James United Church

Message for January 9, 2022

The First Sunday after Epiphany



“A Final Epiphany”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-4; John 2:1-11; Excerpt from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard

As we move forward into a new liturgical season, I'd like to go back, back to last Sunday as we explored several Epiphany stories. You see, we missed a story which, with the magi coming to honour an infant Jesus and a grown-up Jesus being baptized, also reveals who Jesus is. In the story of Jesus changing water into wine, God's glory in Jesus is revealed to others. And like last week's stories, it reveals not just who Jesus is but offers insight into who we are too.

As I begin this exploration, I'd like to note the connection between this first event in Jesus' public life and his last. Jesus' "my time has not yet come" response refers to the end of the story, that is, to his death and resurrection. The intent of the author is to link the two signs, especially with Mary at each, called "Woman" here at the wedding feast and at the foot of the cross. Why does the author do this? We have two thousand years of reflection to draw on to make sense of the cross, but the first few generations of Jesus' followers needed help to process the crisis of his death, to know that his ministry, and theirs with him, was not in vain.

For me the key is found in two details – that the jars were designed to hold water for cleansing rituals and that they are all attending a wedding. On one hand the water being used to purify points to how Jesus' death brings about our forgiveness. But on the other, weddings are about relationships, in Jesus' time more about community relationships than just that of the couple. This part of the story then invites us to see the end of the story, namely Jesus' death and resurrection, through the lens of relationship. We can forget this if we focus on the water jars, made for individual religious practice, making his death and resurrection about me - so my sins are forgiven, or I can go to heaven. But the water is changed into the wine of communion, which binds us together as family. Jesus died for all of us, and because of us, his death a result of the world's sinful structures, systems and mindsets that continue to ensnare us. On the cross, Jesus took on the "sins" of the world and changed how we're to be with each other, made possible our communal resurrection as the Body of Christ, affirmed in every communion.

We need to affirm what it means to be held together as the Body of Christ because it's easy to move in the opposite direction. We were reminded of this on Thursday, the anniversary of the riot at the US Capitol Building. A year later, competing sides still claim their version of what happened is the truth. This division is a symptom of how we increasingly focus on "personal truths" over a shared narrative, listening only to opinions that reinforce their point of view. We

see it here in the pandemic as a sizeable group of people worries more about their freedom being curtailed than the needs of the community. And let's not forget the rise of racist incidents. These examples speak to the pull of individualism in North American culture but more to the point also reveal how much we are influenced by fear, especially fear of "others", so often at play in times of crisis. Fear is used against us, the fearful more easily controlled than the self-confident. Religion has long done this, Christianity included, using fear of God to hold power, sadly creating the opposite of what Jesus intended, with few of the world's systems changed or mindsets challenged, each of us mainly focused on personal piety to keep right with God.

I find it not just sad but ironic. Jesus came to show us the opposite. In his life and teaching, he showed us that we don't need to be afraid, as if God is distant, approachable only if we are pure. Rather God is close, drawing near to us in love. Fear pulls us apart, leaving us isolated and more fearful of each other, so Jesus called his disciples into community across "tribal" lines, bringing together zealots and tax collectors, fishers and farmers, even some Pharisees, to listen to each other, break bread together, and in their relationship to discover that not only are they each blessed as God's beloved children, but are more so as a body. In this they experienced Isaiah's words to be true - they were no longer "abandoned" or "desolate" but called "my delight is in her", and "married".

And as John made clear by linking Cana with the cross, this is still our reality, even more so because resurrection is part of the story, the Spirit present, flowing between us whether we're conscious of it or not, helping us to rise together as the Body of Christ. Despite what historically became of the church, it's still an agent of change in a world that cultivates fear and values individualism over community. Here we have people to lift us up when we're knocked down and remind us that we are loved. We can try new things in a supportive environment and grow in activism, encouraged to respond to issues that we are passionate about. We get to rehearse in an inclusive community the kind of world we want to see, where people of often competing views are brought together and encouraged to listen to each other, where in the inevitability of hurts we get to practice forgiveness, again and again. Here multiple generations come together to explore ideas refined over centuries of tradition. It is all a constant reminder that we're part of something bigger, and in the heart of that is God, helping us see that we need each other, and if we need each other then we must look after each other, treat one another fairly. We are seeing this in the pandemic as well as more fearful reactions and I pray this continues as we face future realities. I believe it will as long as we keep living it out as here as a community of God's beloved children.

As I began, I said we need to go back to move forward by looking at a final Epiphany story. I'd like to do so one more way, drawing on ancient wisdom. Glen and I watch "The Great British Baking Show" and its spin-offs. At the end of a New Zealand episode, a contestant summed up what I've been trying to say in a Maori proverb: "What's the most important thing in this world? Just people, just people, just people." This proverb defined Jesus' life to the end. May it define ours as well. Amen.