

St James United Church

Message for January 23, 2022

Third Sunday after Epiphany



“Embodying Unity and Peace”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 4:21-30; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Excerpt from *The Pentecost Paradigm: Ten Strategies to become a Multiracial Congregation* by Jacqueline J. Lewis and John Janka.

It may be the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity but that is one of very few places I see a desire for cooperation right now, at least that’s how it feels when I watch the news with divisiveness in how to tackle the spread of COVID, Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, athletes arriving in Beijing for the Winter Olympics, which should be all about unity and peace, but the coming games are clouded by possible spying through phone apps on top of a political boycott. We’re in a global crisis that should draw us all together, but we seem to be pulling apart. And as much as I’d like to turn to scripture for help, I don’t see any there at first, at least not in today’s gospel selection as Jesus’ childhood friends and neighbours shift from lauding him to trying to kill him. Again, all I see is people pulled apart when they should have been coming together in pride.

And there’s the rub. They were initially proud of “Joseph’s son” making a name for himself, but it was based on the hope of a spin-off for them. The unravelling isn’t a surprise, the reference to Jesus’ lineage a veiled question of him rising above his social standing. But they could look past him being from the wrong family if his fame shone a spotlight on the village. That’s what they heard in last week’s part of the story, Jesus saying that he was the messiah as he proclaimed that Isaiah’s call was being fulfilled. “Imagine the possibilities”, they thought. Not only would the Romans be out but they might be the new centre of power, Jerusalem elites finally put in their place. But as quickly as their aspirations bubbled up, they burst, Jesus speaking of Elijah and Elisha working miracles for outsiders and not neighbours. He knew they were fixed on their ambitions, couldn’t see beyond their village let alone grasp the bigger picture they were part of.

And we still struggle with that as his followers, quick to make his purpose our personal benefit, turning the church into an exclusive organization with membership defined by correct belief, and that one body split apart into smaller groups. But Jesus came to bring broader spiritual and social transformation, as Jackie Lewis and John Janka remind us, crossing boundaries to bring disparate groups together, his ultimate aim to help us see that God’s love has always been larger than our personal benefit, God’s Reign bigger than one group or people or even species. Focused on the end of the story we overlook Jesus’ teaching, centred on inclusion, unity, cooperation and peace.

Paul understood this, hence his reflection on the centrality of love, not romantically even if we hear his words at weddings, but applied to his teaching on the body of Christ. Consider what he wrote

that it is, and more to the point what it isn't. Love isn't jealous or arrogant, doesn't brag, seek advantage or hold a grudge, all realities that drive people apart. For Paul, love not only maintains the body of Christ but creates it, the image his way to speak of the essential unity we share not just as church but as humans and beyond. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday was last week, described the need for unity this way: "if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional... We must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war... It boils down to this: all life is interrelated...[and so] we are made to live together."

Given this we need to nurture our sense of connection, of unity, and again not just as churches but other groups too – politically, socially, culturally. Fortunately there are strategies to do just that in our day to day lives. I recently read an article by Dr. Beverly B. Palmer of California State University on overcoming divisiveness. She says we need to find ways to relate with rather than avoid people with different opinions than ours. As I read her suggestion that we could volunteer for a cause, join a book club, share a potluck dinner, I thought "that's what we do in church!" As we come together we can help heal divisions between groups rather than perpetuate them.

That being said, the unity we seek doesn't appear with contact alone. It grows with respect, as we listen with open ears and hearts. Despite assumptions about a group's motives, we all need to feel secure. Focusing on common ground can lead to deeper understanding. As we connect as individuals and across groups, disagreements inevitably happen, but at the core is a desire to resolve a shared issue. Palmer suggests a good place to start is in restating the problem and brainstorming ways to solve it. As a solution is offered, rather than automatically dismiss it, you explore additional solutions with the aim of understanding each other's views. At its core is seeing the problem as that, and not linking it with a person, and dismissing a group.

One challenge is our preference for information from the same sources. We end up in echo chambers, reinforcing our viewpoints. I find it helps to read publications from the "opposite" opinion, not to find points to argue but to seek understanding. And it's not just about social or political ideas. There are channels like Omni, Al Jazeera, APTN. Each is a window into other cultures. They often don't just cover different stories than the main channels but offer another approach to the same ones. Connecting this way is a first step in crossing boundaries of race, culture, politics as Jesus did. But it doesn't stop there. Each of us can reach out to neighbours, colleagues, fellow students and take a page from our commitment as a denomination to be an intercultural church, moving beyond a multiculturalism that simply "tolerates" another culture or group, to nurture friendships as we intentionally share with and learn from each other.

So friends, though we live in an increasingly divisive age, I do have hope. Inclusion, unity and peace were central to Jesus and with the Spirit's help, we can nurture them in our world. Both within the church and beyond, as we cross boundaries in order to share with and learn from each other, we will embody the unity and peace at the heart of Jesus' vision for us all. Amen.