

St James United Church

Message for January 30, 2022
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany



“The Bigger Scheme of Things”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; “Light a Fire Against the Night” by David Giulliano

As I’ve shared before, I often go for a long walk with Finley to centre myself before I write my message. This week I decided to hike beside Long Pond and up to the Mt. Scio lookout. The already steep path was made more difficult by the layer of snow over an earlier one of ice, but it was worth it. As I looked toward downtown and out through the narrows, I saw the scope of our city, both nestled in the valleys and clinging to the hills, our home on the edge of the sea.

We need moments like that, to see how we fit in the bigger scheme of things. It can challenge us too, the new view forcing us to see ourselves with a fresh perspective. You get a sense of this in today’s scripture readings with Simon, also known as Peter, who upon seeing the fish swamping the boat confessed his sin and Paul who in describing his experience of the Risen Christ wrote off his past self as dead for persecuting the early church. Difficult as it is to see ourselves with clarity, there is healing as we seek to understand the negatives in us along with the positives. As Paul affirms, over time we can see ourselves with the eyes of God’s grace and can extend to others the same compassion and love.

There’s some of that going on for us as the Freedom Convoy arrived in Ottawa this weekend. At first a protest against the vaccination mandate for truckers, it didn’t take long for the agenda to get ramped up politically, the demands widening from lifting various public health restrictions to all manner of infringements on our freedoms and “liberty”, and some even threatening to overthrow the government. Now most of those who joined this protest were concerned about the border restriction. Likewise, many who cheered on the truckers as they drove by did so out of frustration with a pandemic that brings one wave after another. But just the same, I was so shocked at how quickly it escalated, especially when I realized that some of the leaders have ties to far-right groups, even white supremacist groups. I am left wondering, is this Canada?

And it is. It was only five years ago that Alexandre Bissonnette entered a mosque in Quebec City and opened fire on the congregants, killing six men while they were praying. As much as we are inclusive and compassionate, there are those who equate Canadian identity with being white, and preferably straight, cisgender, and “Christian”. They have a view of where they fit in the scheme of things and for some reason feel it is threatened by people like Daniel Quan-Watson. Deputy minister for Crown-Indigenous Relations, he recently made a video response to Rex Murphy’s article about whether racism and discrimination are a central part of Canadian life. If you haven’t seen this video, I recommend that you watch it. His litany of thousands of moments of discrimination and racially

motivated hate over his fifty plus years, not just growing up but as an adult, line up with what I've been sadly told by friends and colleagues who identify as Black, Indigenous or Asian. They feel they should have a vital place in the Canadian scheme of things, but it is not what they experience, both overtly and in micro-aggressions every day.

For many Canadians, especially if they identify as white, this awareness is new, somewhat like Paul suddenly confronted by the Risen Christ asking why he persecuted him. Our identity was challenged this summer as unmarked graves were found at former Indian residential schools, our shock brought home again this week as yet more were discovered in Williams Lake. For others, especially if they identify as racialized, the awareness has grown over a lifetime. This is like Peter. We think he made a quick decision to follow Jesus, but we skipped events leading to today's reading, including the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Peter got to know Jesus bit by bit, more and more moved by what he heard and saw, especially as it connected to his life.

That's how it is for most of us, able to dismiss others' hurtful experiences until it gets personal - a co-worker shares how they were told "go back where you come from", a friend confides how a male supervisor is getting "handsy", a church member explains they feel violated if someone starts pushing their wheelchair without asking. I don't raise this to make us feel bad. It is a part of human nature to identify with those closest to us. Some say this is why God was revealed in and through the life of Jesus. We need more than an idea of God. We need to experience God, need Jesus to be in the boat with us. And Jesus is there in each other, sharing truths of where we all fit in the scheme of things, truths we can no longer ignore, calling us to respond as he did.

Hence Jesus calling Peter to fish for people. This isn't about "winning souls". The fishing hook was an image used by the prophets regarding unjust situations. With Peter we're called to confront the injustices in our time. We are not alone in this. We are to stand in solidarity, "hearts cracked open by sadness, by defeat, even guilt." For those of us who identify as allies, this means moving past the paralysis that can come when like Paul we realize that we've been persecutors, part of a system that perpetuates harm. And if we're true allies, then we'll take the lead from siblings who've borne the brunt of the hate and injustice we need to struggle against.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says Christ died for our sins. The cross is a shocking revelation of love, God with us in suffering, bearing the burden of a world that kills those who stand against cruelty, exclusion, and greed. In this we see not just solidarity but the need to seek change with love. I've said this before, but it bears repeating. Jesus didn't die to change God's mind about us but to change our mind about God. Those who killed Jesus thought God needed blood and violence. But in Jesus we see a God who would rather die than harm their enemy. We are called to do the same as we seek a world where everyone has a place in the bigger scheme of things, including those who want the opposite, even the far-right leaders of Freedom Convoy 2022.

Friends, I know that last part is difficult but let us remember we aren't alone in any of this. Ultimately, Christ is with us in grace, helping us to see with clarity, grow in unity, and as we love even our enemies, live the true scheme of things, that is the Reign of God. Amen.