

St James United Church

Message for February 6, 2022

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany



“In the Thick of Things”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Lk. 6:17-26; 1 Cor.15:12-20; “A Poem on the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy” by N. Giovanni

As we enter day ten of the “Freedom Convoy” protest in Ottawa, I find myself wanting to both watch as much news as I can and avoid it. It’s a bit like the early days of the pandemic when I knew it was important to stay informed and yet the more news I watched the more stressed out I became, so I started to limit my intake. While a different albeit related situation to the virus, my sense of alarm with the occupation is growing, especially as talk grows of protests planned in other countries. Given organizers’ far-right ties, I worry about similar ties globally. I know we need to be ready for that, but I find myself wanting to pretend none of this is happening.

The pull between being engaged with and escaping from the world has long been a tension in the church. We think of groups like the Amish which withdraw from “modern society” to devote themselves to God, but ironically their disconnection from our society actually helps them to connect with each other. No, the tension I’m thinking of is whether we are to focus on this life or solely on the next. The First Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that this either-or is false. We should be concerned with this life because the blessing of the next is experienced in it.

While this made sense to Paul, it didn’t to the Corinthians. They were influenced by a theology known as Gnosticism, which suggested the world is evil, so marred by sin that God is far away from it and we should act like we are too. For them, our nature is purely spiritual and evident in ecstatic gifts like speaking in tongues. Paul’s theology, on the other hand, was rooted in Jewish teaching which saw God not as removed from the world but close, even involved in history, and calling us to reach out with the highest gift, namely love. God blessed the world with divine goodness from the beginning and still does in our day to day, which we acknowledge when we share communion. For Paul, God didn’t just raise Christ, but promised that we all will be as well, a sign of God’s ongoing blessing in our physical lives, something to be celebrated rather than controlled through prayer and ascetic practice. We don’t flee the world but are part of it, which includes not decrying the world’s problems but doing something to remedy them.

This is what we hear in our gospel as Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place and tends to the people’s needs. In Gnostic thought, Jesus was an angel, not really human. But with the image of him coming to a level place, Luke reveals the opposite, suggesting that in Jesus God is with us in the thick of things, not afraid of the world but touching it, healing it, blessing it. And while there he could see what was going on in people’s lives, and so his blessing included critique, naming aloud how some were rich and others poor, some had a

voice and others had been silenced. He knew that healing requires challenge, not just comfort, that we need to name the sin for it to be overcome.

Which brings me back to Ottawa. While it's fair to say that many truckers are just frustrated with restrictions, we can't ignore the flags and other symbols of hate. If we fail to call them out, we empower those who, using African American poet Nikki Giovanni's image, will fell a tree to fell those contemplating its beauty, in her time trying to quash civil rights and the hope of other progress by killing Robert Kennedy. The struggle continues fifty plus years later, more than a few noting the difference in how mostly white protesters are treated by police and politicians compared with mainly Black or Indigenous protesters in recent months. I am under no illusion, despite how they feel, that the protesters are the voiceless poor in Jesus' sermon. Quite the opposite. Like Jesus who took time to see what was going on, we need to do the same, which includes really listening to racialized Canadians as they call out the privilege on display, including mainly South Asian truckers who aren't in Ottawa. They are raising the alarm on more pressing issues they face like wage theft.

Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to the voiceless like them, not fooled by illusions of their own power but knowing they need the strength that comes from working together. And though I hesitate to say this given how divisive the protest in Ottawa is, I feel "together" goes beyond just the like-minded. Jesus wasn't partisan. Those who went to see him were from the south and the north, from Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish religious life, and Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile area on the coast. As I pondered that, I recalled a news clip of an older woman being interviewed on the street when a protester interjected how he lost his job three weeks ago. At first, I wanted to write him off, but I don't know what's behind his vaccine hesitancy. Feeling compassion, I wish there was a way to hear his experience, and that of the woman being interviewed, and the experiences of Indigenous, Black and other historically sidelined people. There has to be a way to do this. Together we can find a way forward, not just in the pandemic but for society to be more just and caring for everyone.

It isn't easy though, because we can get locked in as we take sides, especially if the person we are listening to harbours disturbing views. But we need to be open, to name our own biases, to let go of ourselves as they do as well for there to be renewal, or as Paul wrote, we will still be in our sins. Which is why even as we are in the thick of things in this life, we do need to be open to the next. We need to follow Jesus' lead as he withdrew to pray before coming down to that level place to speak. We can't heal the world's ills on our own. We need God's grace for our hearts to stay open and be fully present to each other. Only then can we compassionately challenge when we need to and offer the loving comfort that people also desperately need.

Friends, we can feel tension in the Christian life, wanting to focus on prayer and devotion as we seek resurrection in the next life, but feeling the need to respond to the pressing issues of our time and place. May we remember that it's not either-or. God came close to us in Jesus, not aloof but blessing us in our day to day. Joined to him, we too are called to be in the world but prayerfully open to God's grace, called to be present in love. Amen.