

St James United Church

Message for February 13, 2022
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany



“The Way of Love”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 6:27-38; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (pp 87-88, 98)

Here we are in what Hallmark would like us to think of as the season of love, as we show loved ones, especially romantic partners, how we feel. It's a feel-good time. It's nice to be reminded that you're cared for. I remember as a kid how fun it was to give valentines to my friends and then see how many I received. That highlights, though, how these types of holidays are fraught with difficulty. I doubt every child got a full count of cards despite parental encouragement for us to give one to every classmate. For those of us who are older this can be a lonely day too, a reminder of loss rather than love.

That's a reality in a faith community like this and so it's tempting to ignore it all together. But the day means a lot to people too so instead I'd like to redeem it if that's possible. Given that we are a faith community, the best way is through the saint for whom February 14th is the feast day. More a saint of legend than verifiable history, Valentine is reputed to be a martyr, dying for his faith in the third century CE. He may have been a priest, perhaps a bishop, but what I find most interesting is that he was arrested for civil disobedience, officiating at weddings of Christians in a time when it was illegal. But he knew that living the way of love was higher than following the rule of law.

He took seriously the teaching of the one he was willing to die for, who we shockingly hear in the gospel tell us to love our enemies. If we aren't sure how, Jesus goes on to tell us to turn the other cheek, to give our shirt when someone asks for a coat. Sadly, we often don't, or if we do, resent it, not realizing what Jesus was asking us to do. It can feel like we're being told to let those who wish us ill to keep doing the same. Tragically “turn the other cheek” has been used to perpetuate domestic partner violence as mostly women were told to forgive the abuser. Similarly, it's been used to stifle social change, especially regarding racist policies. While an admission of wrongdoing, the one harmed is just the same told to rise above it because it's what Jesus told us to do.

But it's not. We interpret it that way because we don't know Jesus' context. Did you know it was legal in the Roman Empire to slap your inferior, especially a slave, but only using the back of your hand. So, to offer the other cheek is to invite them to punch you, which you can only legally do to someone who is your social equal. Jesus was saying “love your enemy and use non-violent tactics to challenge the system that made you enemies in the first place.” In the same way, giving your shirt along with your coat is a form of non-violent protest. This is most clear when “ask” is translated as “sue”, the actual context. Remember that in that time you wouldn't have a closet of clothes, nor did a shirt go with a pair of trousers. The shirt went down to your feet. You're giving all

that you have on, which if done in public, shames the opponent suing you for your coat in the first place. It's non-violent resistance through performance art. Seeking reform like this was a way not only to treat others as they'd like to be treated, but a challenge for them to do the same.

Jesus was a strategist as well as a reformer, teaching us all how to confront injustice. But as we hear in Paul his scope was spiritual too. At a cosmic level he was breaking the power of capital D-Death, the way of violence, hate and division that is used to hold onto power, those who dominate others cheapening life as they treat people as expendable. He knew we can't break Death's grip with more of the same. Then we're beholden to its power. We need its opposite, capital L-Life, weakening Death's hold with solidarity, peace, and love. He accepted death rather than respond with violence, a choice vindicated by God, Paul tells us, as God raised him from the dead.

And it is a shared resurrection as his path of love inspires others. Like Mohandas Gandhi who looked to Jesus as well as his own tradition in finding ways to win Indian independence. Gandhi in turn inspired Martin Luther King Jr. who advocated non-violent action like the Montgomery bus boycott in the push for civil rights. Civil disobedience is another tactic. Years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Viola Desmond refused to move to the balcony in a New Glasgow cinema. Her trial brought Canadian racism in view, in part because Carrie Best, arrested years earlier for doing the same, founded "The Clarion" in which she ran articles about Viola's case. Civil disobedience and news campaigns are two types of non-violent protest and persuasion among 198 documented by the Albert Einstein Institution, which studies this kind of action. Whether an art installation (like ribbons tied on the fence of Government House) or camping in defiance of military order (like the Innu activists who were protesting low-level flights), non-violent protest seeks lasting change through the way of love, and it's more effective than using violence in doing so.

Convoys are also a tactic, have been used in Canada effectively, but for me, love is the test of whether or not a protest is truly non-violent. bell hooks, a Black author and activist who studied the intersection of race, gender and social status, writes that a love ethic means making choices based on "loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement". Love doesn't try to exercise power over others but seeks the collective good. But can the "peaceful protests" in Ottawa and at borders, be considered as peaceful even if without physical violence? I don't think so, not if we factor in the rhetoric of organizers, the intimidation of residents in Centretown, the display of symbols which evoke the threat of violence. Finally, I question if the protestors have the collective good at heart. Thankfully, though many of us are just as tired, we still have the collective good at heart two years on. We have a right to protest, but it is not without limits, especially if it lacks love.

And love is the ethic we need above all else, especially if we say we follow Jesus. When we look at how he lived as well as what he taught, we see love for others, enemies included, that's willing to sacrifice. St. Valentine took this to heart, and I believe most of us do as well, not just in the season of love but every day. Love is our response, especially as we seek needed change in our world. Amen.