

St James United Church

Message for February 20, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany



“Defeating Death”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 6:40-48; 1 Corinthians 15:53-58; “Of Earth and Sky” by Drew Jackson

I'm loath to refer to the protest in Ottawa, having done so the last couple of weeks, but it's hard to ignore, especially if I do as I was taught and prepare my message with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. These last weeks, I've felt mixed emotions, and now the occupation is nearly over, my relief is tempered with worry. As a criminologist being interviewed wisely said, “We'll be dealing with the fallout of the protest for years to come.” No matter what position you hold about the initial convoy and the blockades, we're witnessing evidence of a fissure that has been opening up in our country over the last decade, and greatly widened in these last two years.

It's troubling, but not without resolution. It feels providential to me that these weeks we've heard Paul speaking to us through his correspondence with the Christians in Corinth. In today's reading he says sin is how Death stings us. Death and sin are viewed as a consequence of our mythic first parents eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. I see it less as an actual event than as commentary on the human tendency to split the world into categories rather than see it as a whole. Understood most broadly, sin is about separation, resulting in the pitting of one against another, evident just after “the fall” when the first humans blamed others for what occurred. That sense of separation is how Death with a capital D does its work. As I shared last week, this is not death of the body but the experience of domination and violence that's so much part of human history, including Canada's, despite protestations otherwise as we compare ourselves to the US.

After all, our history is tied up with the so-called “Age of Discovery” just as for them, a period that saw the start of the sin of separation writ large, Europeans viewing peoples in “conquered” lands as lesser than, even as not fully human, resulting in the Atlantic slave trade, and after slavery's abolition, perpetuated in segregation, lynchings, redlining of neighbourhoods, excessive force by police, mass incarceration. Add to this the treatment of Indigenous peoples as well as people in Asia, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and we see how separation becomes an instrument of Death. And it isn't just about race. I'm sure that you can think of many other instances when this is at play, and not just historically, be it in politics, economics, religion, culture, the environment.

Thankfully this isn't the only narrative. Earlier in Genesis than the story of “the fall” is a vision of original harmony, deep connection within creation, capital-L Life. Its source is in God, or as Drew Jackson puts it, being “of earth and sky”. We often think humans were uniquely animated with divine breath as well as formed from humus, a view that when tied to racial categories easily led

to everything I just referred to. But elsewhere in the Bible we're told that all of creation has God's breath, and it's creation as an interdependent system that God declares very good. That teaching informed Paul's reflection on the imperishability of bodily resurrection, all of us to be glorified in continuity with who we are now. To be aware of this shared, divine connection is to live in Christ, to honour what it means to have been made in the *imago Dei*, not a quality that separates us from the rest of creation, or more tragically from other humans, but a vocation for us to embody God's love for it all, recognizing how everyone and everything is essential for us to be whole.

This is the narrative I hear as Drew climbs onto his Grandma's lap to hear the stories of the ancestors, the "Greats and Great Greats who did some / great and not-so-great things". There in her embrace, he received more than stories. He was gifted with identity, connection and hope. There he learned that his family tree was "filled with triumph and struggle". His ancestors were separated out by Europeans as lesser than and so enslaved but that didn't define them. More than simply surviving, they thrived, because rather than be pitted against each other, they looked after one another, working together and reaching out to allies, always knowing they were held by God, who as we see in Jesus' suffering is joined to us when all seems lost, strengthening us to keep going in the struggle against Death. A big part of that is not perpetuating separation, not even within ourselves, but embracing the fullness of our experience, including the not-so-great things we do. When we do this, we cut off one of Death's secret tactics - projecting our sins onto others, then judging the speck in their eye. As we accept ourselves, we make space for others.

Drew's words remind me that I don't need to fear the narrative given strength by the occupation. We have a counter narrative we rehearse Sunday after Sunday. Like Drew in his grandma's lap, each week we celebrate identity, connection and hope. Here we retell stories of our ancestors in faith. Their struggles invite us to be honest with ourselves and their triumphs encourage us to do better. Part of that is intentionally being a place of connection across generations, identities and backgrounds. This is our goal as an Affirming Ministry – to be a safe haven for everyone. This is crucial as people seem increasingly fearful and suspicious, seeing others as potential enemies. In that climate, we must live out the vocation of being the *imago Dei* and treat newcomers like charter members, see visitors not as strangers but siblings. It means challenging ways we still categorize and separate, but we are a faith community, and so we encourage each other to pray. There with hearts open, God loving us as we are, we experience God loving everyone else as well. In all this we renew our identity in Christ, a living connection through which we embody the mutual care, loving solidarity, and compassionate justice that are hallmarks of God's Reign. It sounds ideal, I know, but even if it is imperfect, we are making present week after week a narrative of Life that will win over Death.

How do I know this? Because we're not on our own. As a congregation we're joined to countless others and beyond Christian churches to myriad communities across many faiths. With the Spirit enabling us to embody God's connection, harmony and care, capital-L Life will stand. Amen.