

St James United Church

Message for March 27, 2022

Fourth Sunday in Lent



“A Tale of Two Brothers”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; Excerpt from *The Story of a Soul* by Thérèse of Lisieux

Let me tell you a tale of two brothers, of me and my brother Mike. Three years older than me, I idolized him. I followed him around, helped with his paper route, for free I might add, listened to bands he liked. When we moved back to the UK, I was hurt that he returned to Canada after two months. It sounds like we’ve always been close but there was a long period we didn’t speak. He ceased contact with my dad and stepmom, with good reason, but cut me out as well. He didn’t come to my ordination. I’d go to Ontario, but he wasn’t interested in seeing me. No explanation.

Those with siblings know that’s how it is sometimes, no guarantee you’ll be close. There may be indifference, full-on conflict, permanent fracture. We’re not sure if that’s the case in the parable, but given the older sibling’s reaction to his little brother’s return, I wonder if the younger’s exit was motivated by bad blood with his brother. Don’t get me wrong. He’s still bad. Even if the request for his share of the property was about getting away from his brother, not his dad, just to ask for it was to wish his dad was dead. Among other flawed traits, the speech he rehearses suggests he was set to con the family a second time. But the father looks past this and offers a way forward beyond ongoing conflict, hurt and judgement, a way of healing for all of us.

We get a hint of this in the Book of Joshua. It’s a story of sibling rivalry, noticeable when it’s read alongside the archaeological record. Unlike the biblical story’s claim that God led the Israelites to a land promised to them through their ancestor Abraham, many archaeologists believe that the Canaanites and Israelites were related, the Canaanites on the coastal plains while the Israelites settled in the highlands. Joshua is a story of national conquest but in a few places the bible hints that Canaanites weren’t killed but absorbed into Israel as one “sibling” grew and the other waned. Knowing this reminds me not to enshrine a narrative of conflict, that the bible imagines another way. Consider a scene just after today’s portion. Joshua meets a man with a sword. When he asks if the man is one with them or their enemy, he says “I’m with God’s heavenly host”. This angel is for neither people and for both.

We see the same refusal to take sides in the father of the parable. Despite the hurt of his younger son’s request, he gave him his inheritance. He waited day and night for his child’s return and ran to him as soon as he saw him. He didn’t give him a chance to finish his speech but welcomed him home, an act that makes a big difference as the son makes no pitch but

simply confesses his sin. Likewise, when the older son refused to join the feast, the father went to find him. He heard out his eldest's complaint and reminded him that his sibling was a part of the family. He wanted them to break bread together.

Ultimately, all the father wanted was for his sons to be in relationship, a divine desire at the heart of most faith traditions. We see this as the community in Joshua shared Passover where they retold their collective history and shared a meal, both ways to re-establish their family bond. And as we consider the archaeological record, it was likely a meal that included the Canaanites living alongside them, affirming a mutual bond across cultural difference. This is the heart of Thérèse of Lisieux's experience with the sister in the convent. There was annoyance, even enmity, but in love she looked to what they shared, which in their case was Christ's presence, affirmed in daily prayer, communion, conversation, shared meals. Over time that softened Thérèse's attitude.

Her experience underscores how spending time together helps us not just to form relationships but to heal them when they're broken. The last two years have been hard for many of us, in large part because we've not spent time together. It's likely why despite how people pulled together at the start of the pandemic, by year two people were forming opposing camps, seen most strongly in the Freedom Convoy. And while the pandemic isn't over, I'm glad restrictions have softened. We need to find ways to be together not just as neighbours but as congregants. I'm glad we are sharing a lunch today, will have breakfast at Easter and then experiment with weekly coffee and tea after worship. It's natural for people to have differing opinions but we don't want to break into factions. Spending time together will help us renew our relationships and so to strengthen our shared ministry.

We're called not just to be siblings in these four walls but to engage with the wider community. Doing so is a way to honour our shared history. One constant I've heard in conversations about St. James' early years is how you intentionally reached out to your neighbours. I believe we're called to do this again but using the theme of the parable. Jesus' audience was the Pharisees who judged the "outsiders" he ate with. Like the older son, suspicious of his brother, they didn't trust their motives and questioned why they didn't follow the rules. I pray we model the father instead, living our commitment as an Affirming Ministry and like the father going out to see who is on the horizon and when they come, to welcome them without question or expectation that they hold a set list of beliefs or behave a certain way. An open welcome says "you belong".

Friends, today's readings are about brothers, sisters, siblings. There was conflict, but in each the call to be family was more important. Thankfully that's how the story with my brother ends. We eventually healed the rift. He came to Glen's and my wedding. We now see him regularly, chat on the phone, compare notes about bands. We are family again. May we live that out here at St. James, in St. John's and our world. At heart we are siblings, God the welcoming parent of us all. Amen.