

St James United Church

Message for May 29, 2022
Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday



"The Triumph of Love"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

John 17:20-26; Acts 16:22-34; "Ascension" by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

I have to say that I'm feeling overwhelmed, even giving in to despair, what with a second mass shooting in the US this week, this time in a school. Plus, we're now in the fourth month since the war in Ukraine began and it looks like there will be many more to come before it is over. That conflict has contributed to high oil prices fuelling inflation and leaving many of us worrying if we can make ends meet. There has been a string of shootings locally, likely connected to organized crime. And the pandemic isn't even over yet. So much for the sense of joy and hope that we often associate with the seven weeks of the Easter season.

I am finding it hard, so hats off to earlier generations who had it harder still, especially in many parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, among other places in the world. It's no surprise then that preachers would focus on the joy that awaits us in the life to come. And why not? This past Thursday was Ascension Day, when we recall how the Risen Christ was lifted up to heaven. Given the state of the world, why shouldn't you want to be lifted up to heaven with Jesus in order to escape all that we face here? I get that.

But as we eavesdrop on Jesus' prayer in John 17, I hear a different promise, one that brings me much more hope than any kind of heavenly escape. A continuation from last week as Jesus promised that the Spirit would be with us to remind us of all that he taught, today he prays for unity, that we be completely one as he and the Father are one. The source of that unity is love, the same love as at the heart of the Trinity, the common life of Father, Son and Spirit, all of us held in divine communion, an idea expressed in the words of retired Methodist minister, Steve Garnaas-Holmes: "he didn't go up, he went out. Into all of us." Sharing in God's fundamental life of love. That gives me hope.

It's the key really. God's love flowing in and through us. Not the emotion, which can seem more akin to the word "like" with people loving ice cream or a brownie, people loving someone and then not loving them anymore, but a reality deeper than that, loving even if I'm angry, even if I feel betrayed, even if I fundamentally disagree with someone's worldview, am wrestling with my own biases, or struggling to forgive someone. In God's love we can seek to understand and extend compassion, to keep helping someone though we feel like our cup is empty, to keep listening though it is difficult to do so, to give someone yet another chance.

I don't know about you, but those qualities feel countercultural. And they should. The story of the ascension isn't so much about Jesus going to heaven, and us with him, as it is about his

triumph over the “world”, over the anything but loving dynamic that shaped the culture in which he lived, in which Paul and his companions lived, and which in many ways still shapes our own culture. We see it in Acts 16, picking up on the story of Paul and Silas in Philippi. After many days preaching, Paul healed an enslaved woman possessed by a spirit which told the future. She made a lot of money for her “owners”, so, angered over their lost income, they had Paul and Silas jailed on false charges. In a sense, Paul’s healing of her can be seen as a direct challenge to the economics of putting profit before people. It was countercultural then and sadly continues to be now. And in our reading, we see another countercultural moment when Paul and Silas and the rest of the prisoners stayed in their cell after the earthquake. You would think they’d escape, let the jailer face the lethal consequences coming to him. After all he’d put them in the harshest area of the prison, put them in stocks, a form of torture. But unlike what we expect in a world more defined by retribution than restoration, they considered the needs of their captor. Why? Because they recognized that he was as caught in the system as they were. Love tries to understand, has compassion, forgives.

And this still applies. You may not see yourselves as countercultural, but you are. Yes, going to church is something everyone used to do, but less so now. You are still coming. And why? Is it because of my amazing sermons? You can say it is but I know that the real reason is because you love each other. In this place you have been there for each other, seen each other through illnesses and bereavements, job losses and relationship struggles, been there in good times, celebrating births and baptisms, convocations, and confirmations. You pay attention to who sits near you and help them feel welcome, not only saying hello but inviting them for tea so you get to know them. You pay attention if someone’s missing. Because you love them you let me or Susan know so we can check in on them, and do the same formally through the UCW, AOTS, the lay visitation team. You look out for each other, which is why we’re organising a phone tree. I encourage you to help with this, as it’s a way for us to make sure no one is overlooked. And you extend that love further as you support the food bank, agencies like Stella’s Circle, and are looking at ecological concerns. We live in an increasingly fractured and isolated world, even here in Newfoundland. But you counterbalance it by being a loving community.

And in doing this, we act as leaven. That’s what Jesus was hoping for when he prayed that the world would know that God sent him by our unity, by our mutual love. We do that by extending the divine love we experience here into the world. Because you’ve learned here that it’s ok to make friends with someone who grew up around a different bay, or in a different country, how to listen to someone with a different view than you have, to seek understanding and to extend compassion, you do the same with your neighbours. You look out for them, see them through hard times and rejoice in the good. That helps to create loving neighbourhoods and inspires your neighbours to extend the same to a co-worker, their child’s teacher, someone in need, to intervene when someone is in crisis, to love an “enemy”. They do what they’ve seen you do.

And that gives me hope. It reminds me that the Easter season is not just seven weeks of joy in the resurrection but an affirmation of the ongoing presence of Christ in our lives, a proclamation that life has the last word, that love does triumph over hate, made possible because Jesus didn’t just go up to heaven, but also out to us, through the Spirit, to extend his love to all. Amen.