

# St James United Church

Message for June 26, 2022

Memorial Sunday

“The Power of ‘And’”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: 2 Kings 2:8-15; Lk. 9:51-62; Charlie Chaplin’s concluding speech in “The Great Dictator”

At 9:15 am on July 1, 1916, more than eight hundred Newfoundlanders went over the top into no man’s land at Beaumont-Hamel. The next morning only sixty-eight answered roll call, a horrific death toll for a tiny Dominion, made more so by the futility of the loss, historians agreeing that the Great War achieved little, and the treaty that followed setting the stage for the next conflict. But the great powers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had backed themselves into a corner with promises of mutual defence, despite all there was to lose given how intertwined they were in finance and trade. Sound familiar?

In many ways we’re the same world as from a century before, locked into opposing alliances, despite deep global integration, and with recent rollbacks on women’s rights in the US and an uptick in racist as well as anti-gay and trans violence, it feels like the war in Ukraine is not the only “us-or-them” echo of the past. As we hear in James’ and John’s request to pray for fire to come down from heaven to kill the Samaritans, the wars, divisions and other injustices from the last two centuries are repeats of a yet older narrative of suspicion, fear and violence.

Thankfully, our scripture offers an alternative as Jesus rebukes James and John for their bad attitude and not the Samaritans. In fact, Jesus further challenges their prejudice a chapter later in a parable that reversed assumptions, a Samaritan helping a so-called “enemy”. Jesus could do this because unlike many of his contemporaries, he didn’t see his first identity as belonging to his nation. We think of him as “Son of God”, but his preferred identity was as “Son of Man”, “Human One”. He saw himself as a child of humanity, an identity that influenced Charlie Chaplin in the final speech of “The Great Dictator” when a barber (and dictator lookalike) appealed to his audience’s sense of shared humanity and not the global power wanted by his double.

I believe that’s still who we are, focused on what we share as humans, despite how the speech as easily could have been written for today as at the start of World War II. It rings true because we keep missing a key piece to live into Jesus’ spiritual vision quoted by Chaplin. God’s Reign is in all of us, but it can’t take hold if we focus on the word “or” – Samaritans or Judeans, Triple Alliance or Triple Entente, woman or man, Black or white, trans or cis. We think in binaries and assume the rights of one can only be bolstered if another’s are narrowed, making a dominant group quick to roll back minority rights if they feel less secure in their position. Hence James and John invoking God’s wrath. But Jesus’ teaching hinges on the word “and”. He understood that our core sin is the belief that we are separate from God, a view codified in some groups,

even genders, seen as more distant from God than others. We call Jesus Son of God because he joins the divine and human. He wants us to see the same in ourselves, recognize the divine and human and so love saints and sinners as he did, love the saintly and sinful in us as he did.

The second point is often a precursor to the first, peace in the world only possible if I seek it in my relationships, which only comes if I'm at peace with myself. That begins with a different fire than what James and John wanted to call upon. On Pentecost, the disciples could share the good news despite a language barrier, but first tongues of fire came to each of them, a healing grace that opened their hearts, enabling them to go on to preach to Samaritans, and then far afield to Greeks and Romans, akin to Elisha receiving a double portion of the Spirit so that he could continue on from Elijah. In our gospel, Jesus told a possible disciple that unlike birds, he had no place to sleep. He may have been warning about the itinerant nature of his work, or lamenting his "rejection", but what if rather than saying he had nowhere to go he meant that one day every heart would be his nest, resting in everyone through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

That grace leads us to God's peace, something we become ever more conscious of in prayer practices like meditation, where we seek to connect with Christ resting within, attentive to our true self joined to God's love. We also become more conscious of the self which is addicted to separation – from God, others – the one triggered by hurt and then projecting it onto "enemies". A practice I like is centring prayer. As I've shared, you sit in silence, present to God, aware of thoughts then letting them go. But what if a past hurt arises? Our instinct is to focus on it, give it energy. Instead in prayer, we name it (say 'resentment toward my mom'), then let it go, having the power to say, "I don't need to feed the resentment. I know who I am without it." This is a practice of "and" rather than "or", an acknowledgement rather than denial. We create "enemies" when we deny our hurts. Left to their own devices, they keep triggering reactions against others. Instead, we prayerfully accept them, love them, aware that God loves those parts in us as much as the parts we prefer, and create space to be more loving to those around us and beyond.

Jesus came to show us this love, individually and collectively, but despite that, we tend to see the gospel individually or collectively. Connected to what I shared, along with other types of spiritual experience, many rightly see the gospel as about individual salvation, about healing that perceived divide between us and God, God's forgiveness key to the kingdom being within you. Alternatively, and this aligns well with a United Church ethos, many rightly think of it in terms of social justice and thus as a call to followers of Jesus to unite for a better world à la Charlie Chaplin's speech. But it's a false choice, not an "or" but an "and" here too. Jesus shows us how we are each beloved of God. As a consequence, we all are beloved of God, Judeans, Samaritans, Gentiles, women, men, Black, white, gay, straight, Newfoundlander, German, each and all beloved, no need for enemies, rights, responsibilities, and privileges shared by all, our individual acceptance leading to shared acceptance leading to peace.

A hundred plus years ago the world erupted into war, in large part because we invest "or" with power. In contrast Jesus came to teach us about "and", inviting us to imagine a world built on love and acceptance of all. May we accept his call and Spirit will lead us to God's peace. Amen.