

St James United Church

Message for July 24, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost



“Restoring Grace”
- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Hosea 1:2-11; Luke 11:1-13

As Pride Week in St. John’s comes to an end today, I'd like to pick up a couple of strands from last week's Pride reflection as they tie into today's readings. You'll recall how my main point was about offering true welcome to all, ourselves included as we learn to see the parts of our lives that we would rather hide, to see them with the compassionate love that God has for us.

As I shared, in many ways that's the hardest part, at times more difficult than offering love and acceptance to another person. We've been taught to judge ourselves and assume God angrily judges everything we do, even though “judgement” is more rightly what we do to ourselves, impacted by the consequences of our actions. Given that, it's easy to miss the point of our reading from Hosea. I find myself distracted by God telling Hosea to marry Gomer, a sex worker, and have children with her as a prophetic sign rather than out of love, distracted by my judgement of her and what she does, distracted by the names given to the children, each appearing to be a judgement from God. I imagine the kids having to carry those names. That's how judgement works. It distracts us, sows self-doubt, isolates.

But the reading doesn't end in isolation. God promises to uphold them, ensure they recover from the calamities they face, including their coming fall to Assyria. Turns out Hosea isn't about judgement but a promise of restoration. Despite all the reasons that by our logic God should reject us for what we've done, something we're quick to do to each other and our-selves even more so, God is faithful and loves us no matter what. I don't know about you, but I need that promise of God's love right now. The war in Ukraine continues. Europe had a heatwave so bad that buildings and trees in London caught fire. There are rumours that the Freedom Convoy plans to protest the pope's apology in Alberta. It feels as hopeless as it must have done in Hosea's time. But despite all they faced, God promised that the remnant of the nation would be as numerous as the sand, and Israel and Judah would be reunited.

That is the opposite of judgement, instead a pledge to be with them, not for anything they'd done but simply in faithful love. That pledge is offered to us as we hear in Jesus' parable about prayer. Jesus tells us that God is like a loving parent, giving us what we need, especially in hard times. The heart of Jesus' promise is the Holy Spirit, a pledge to be with us in what we face and not just to take it away. Now this doesn't mean we just accept difficulties. We need to be active in our lives, doing what we can in the face of hardship and injustice, and not just for

ourselves, but collectively in the wider issues I mentioned earlier. As Jesus promised, when we seek, we find. When we knock, the door opens. But not for a miracle, with grace. That's my experience at least, that when I've felt almost completely tapped out, with no more to give, I've found welling up in me a renewed capacity to keep going, a strength I didn't know I had. I believe it was the Spirit.

That gift of the Spirit is not just for some future time but grounded in what we experience right now. There was a hint of this in last week's Martha and Mary story. In addition to not taking the bait to chastise Mary, Jesus pointed out how distracted Martha was when like her sister she needed only one thing, what was right before her. We hear this suggestion in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. "Give us the bread we need for today" is what we pray, not bread we need for tomorrow or a year from now. This call to focus on the present is reinforced in this version of Jesus' Prayer compared to Matthew's which we usually pray. Luke omits reference to heaven and of deliverance from the Evil One. It feels to me like the prayer for God's reign to come is about attentiveness, an awareness that God's reign is already, albeit not fully realized, eyes open to where God is present right now, to where grace is at play in our lives. I've shared this before, but when we actively look for where the Spirit is at work, when we approach life from a place of gratitude, of trust in God's faithful love, we begin to see abundant evidence of God with us throughout the day, present long before we are banging on the door seeking aid.

We don't even need to be aware of it for God to be with us. Sometimes we just feel moved to do something. Last night we watched the film "Pride". It's based on the true story of a group formed in 1984 in London to raise money for striking coal miners in South Wales, "Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners". Many in the LGBTQI+ community opposed the cause given how badly they'd been treated growing up in rural Britain. And miners were reluctant to accept the help, afraid they'd be laughed at. But LGSM persisted, inspired by what they held in common, both groups harassed by police and berated by the government. That shared experience of struggle created space for them to come together and overcome their judgements. In the end the miners returned the favour, not only coming down to London in support of gay rights the next year, but pushing for equality politically. But the beginning point was a moment of inspiration, I believe rooted in God's love, a felt sense of self-acceptance rather than judgement that the leaders of the group kept drawing on, a love from within that enabled them to keep loving those they felt called to help, even when rejected. Despite all the bad news we hear, I believe those kinds of experiences are happening all the time, often not big, or ready for film, but moments of restoration made possible in God's love.

This gives me hope despite the challenging situations we face in the world, and many of us experience personally, God is present, loving us, strengthening us. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the future, worried we are facing some kind of judgement, even one we have brought on ourselves. But in the midst of it all is God, present with compassion, restoring our hearts with strength, with grace in each moment, leading us on, ever faithful and ever true. Amen.