

# St James United Church

Message for July 31, 2022

Emancipation Sunday (8th Sunday after Pentecost)



“The Cry for Freedom”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Hosea 11:1-11; Luke 12:13-21; Excerpt from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

It's been an historic week as Pope Francis expressed contrition on Indigenous land. And though his apology fell short for many, it was an important step in the long road of reconciliation between the churches and Indigenous peoples. To me, as significant as the apologies, if not more so, were the moments of defiance. Like the woman singing what sounded like O Canada but was actually a song for the land, and then calling for respect of Indigenous peoples. Or the women holding a banner calling on the pope to rescind the “doctrine of discovery”. Those moments were powerful, speaking to me of the resilience of Indigenous peoples, crying out for freedom, for the freedom of ongoing sovereignty, of respect for who they are, for freedom from ongoing harm.

As I pondered that cry for freedom, I was conscious of the ongoing cry of others who endure similar trauma – people of Middle Eastern descent labelled as terrorists, the Jewish community subject to centuries of hatred, and especially people from Africa and the African Diaspora, again and again the target of racial hatred and oppression despite the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 and the US in 1863. As much as we need to celebrate nearly two hundred years of “freedom”, those of us here who identify as Black will say they still cry for it, subjects of institutional prejudice and interpersonal harm, too often from those claiming to follow Jesus.

Sadly, that's how it started, with a church decree. Despite a papal bull made by an earlier pope saying rights of non-Christians had to be respected, in 1493, Pope Alexander VI gave Spanish monarchs and their delegates full authority to spread the gospel in newly discovered lands. The decree claimed that evangelization was the purpose of exploration, but the many injustices that followed Columbus' “discovery” of Caribbean islands betrays how colonizers saw the peoples, along with land, as belonging to them. Thus began a story of displacement and enslavement.

Did you know that the first enslaved peoples in the New World were Indigenous? I'm reminded of this each time I drive by the statue of Gaspar Corte-Real across from the Confederation Building, given to Newfoundland and Labrador by Portugal. He abducted 57 Indigenous people from these lands in 1501. We have no idea where they ended up, but likely sent to mine for precious metals or to labour in the fields. There were slaves in Canada, just as there were in the Caribbean and American colonies, Indigenous first and then African when the Indigenous population collapsed. And though there were few enslaved people in Newfoundland itself, we can't forget how we were one point of the route that made the Transatlantic Slave Trade profitable. And in the end that was the point. In 1537, another papal bull forbade enslaving

Indigenous peoples along with any other peoples, but by then it was engrained in colonial practice, proof that wealth and not faith was the true goal of exploration.

Faith was at play nonetheless, but not the way of Jesus, instead Christians colluding with empire, papal bulls used by governments to validate their “right” to displace Indigenous peoples, enslave peoples stolen from their homes in Africa, and ensure through formal policy, and mob terror, that all keep their place in a white man’s country. A link between church and colonialism was forged, leading to the crimes Pope Francis came to atone for, and as Frederick Douglass observed, led to churches’ collusion with slavery. He wasn’t exaggerating when he wrote: “we have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members.... The slave auctioneer’s bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other.” Orders of priests and nuns as well as Protestant clergy owned enslaved Africans. Why? Because it was profitable, making it possible for plantation owners to “eat, drink and be merry”, just like in the parable.

As I ponder this history, I am left feeling deep sadness. It was all possible because unlike what Jesus said about not being a judge, Christians became really good at judging others, going so far as to create racial hierarchies to justify their sin. We created warrants based on bad biblical interpretation. We made faith about going to heaven, twisting statements like Jesus’ concluding words in his parable, “This is the way it will be for those who hoard for themselves and don’t invest in God” into a call to piety, forgetting how Jesus was crucified for standing up to greed, power and the judgement of others, killed for his own cry for freedom for all on the margins.

Thankfully, Jesus still goes before us, inviting us again to work for liberation, equity and justice for all. Just as God didn’t give up on Israel, despite how they turned to false gods, God hasn’t given up on us, either as a nation or a church, despite the sin of Canada’s once unofficial whites only policy, or the testimony of Black, Indigenous and other racialized commissioners to the General Council in 2018 of ongoing racism in the United Church. What we’ve witnessed not just this week but in the last few years tells me the Spirit is moving, giving residential school survivors the resilience to not just keep pushing for a papal apology but to have it backed with concrete action, empowering the Black community to keep challenging racism here in Canada, the US and in other colonial powers, including in the church, inspiring white allies how they need to go beyond learning about these issues, important as that is, to work for institutional change, no matter how difficult, and it is, and so to refashion congregations like this one into truly inclusive, anti-racist communities, where no one is treated like the belonging of another, but rather we all simply belong, everyone equals of each other around one table.

I’m sure that like me you found it hard to hear the apologies, but the Spirit is at work through the pain of confronting our history. Pope Francis said the survivors’ testimonies had weighed on his heart, but that enabled him to make a truly heartfelt apology. That’s the way of Christ. It takes us through the cross to new life, where we follow Jesus, not only with an eye to heaven, but committed to all peoples, Black, Indigenous, Asian, white, a commitment that leads to freedom for us all. Amen.