

# St James United Church

Message for August 14, 2022

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost



“An unexpected Jesus”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56; Excerpt from Howard Thurman’s *Meditations of the Heart*

As part of my training to minister in the United Church, I took a module at the Centre for Christian Studies. In addition to the course focus, I gained insight into United Church values, important when you are coming from a different denomination. One day, the prof taught how churches approach the bible in one of three ways. With the exodus as an example, he said traditional churches will focus on the giving of the commandments. I wasn’t surprised that didn’t grab my classmates’ attention. In contrast, he said, those ascribing to liberation theology will emphasize God rescuing the people from slavery. I nodded at that. I come out of a church that seems law-focused, but Catholicism has a long social justice tradition, something it shares with the United Church. I expected nods from my peers, but nothing. He then explained how between the poles is a focus on God’s inclusive love, seen in God feeding the people with manna and no one left behind when they got to the Promised Land. That’s when they nodded.

Clearly that’s the approach they preferred, and we do across the church. In fact, in the sixteen plus years I’ve been in ministry in the United Church I’ve noticed how often I now tilt towards a narrative of love and inclusion. Which is likely why I find the end of Luke chapter 12 troubling. What does Jesus mean he’s come to bring fire? And why is he speaking of division? That’s not the Jesus who eats with outcasts, welcomes children, next week heals a woman with a long-term infirmity. This is unexpected, not the inclusive, compassionate Jesus most of us think about.

In the end, my reaction says more about us than Jesus. Understandable. We’re a uniting church, all about joining people together not dividing them, so much so that at our last General Council a proposal was passed encouraging us to cooperate more with other churches and faith groups. In the end, Jesus isn’t asking us to abandon inclusive love in favour of liberating justice. They go together. Jesus is telling us what to expect as we seek both, that seriously taking his path may divide families, one part not wanting to rock the boat, the other pushing for change. As we hear in Isaiah, that’s been a back-and-forth tension from the start. Part of Israel’s origin story was being freed from slavery, God planting them like a vineyard, but rather than growing as a people of equity, they often fell back into patterns learned in Egypt. God thus decried their failure to produce the fruit of justice. There’s anger here but it’s part of a larger story in the scriptures of liberation and love, a call to match inner righteousness with outwardly just action. Jesus is part of this narrative. Loving yes, but he could also get angry, compassionate but never a pushover.

And yet often I can be, finding it easier to focus on his love and forgiveness and overlook his angry talk in this passage. I think at times we fear rocking the church boat, as we recall 1988 when we chose to include LGBTQI+ people in all aspects of church life, including in ministry,

and as we remember the acrimony and division that followed. Some fear that the loss of congregations has made the decline that all churches are facing worse than it would have been. Other denominations have caught up to our decision, placing us, I believe, where Jesus was calling us, but the experience weighs on us just the same. So much so we retell the reasons for our decision as about inclusion, and not as standing up on a question of justice, a statement of solidarity when the LGBTQI+ community really needed us.

But we don't need to be afraid of making waves. When St. James became an Affirming Ministry, we showed we can come together on potentially boat rocking issues. And we need to because there are still people who need us, even in the church. As I said, part of what drew me to the UCC is how we walk our talk. Hence not only apologizing to Indigenous peoples for our role in Residential Schools but submitting records to the TRC, compensating survivors, disavowing the doctrine of discovery. Yet at the last General Council hurtful comments were made by some white commissioners against proposals affirming the autonomy of Indigenous congregations within the United Church. We struggle to release control, even if it is opposed to the gospel.

That moment reminded me how we can end up stuck, not just as a church but more broadly as a society, unable to fix a system that is letting so many of us down. Like a man in need of housing who recently sat in my office with nowhere to turn. I called someone at Stella's Circle, and she shared how the number of folks needing housing has skyrocketed. And so I had to send him on his way with a blessing and some crackers because there was no bed. It broke my heart but that's where it's at. And though historically, the people of this province have been less affluent than many others, in a global context we are still on average in the top percentile, and are so because the same economic system that has let down the most marginal locally, has also served more of us when compared to people in the global south.

So what do we do to get unstuck? As I shared in our Learning Together time, in the last triennium, through the guidance of then moderator Richard Bott, the UCC adopted a threefold call: Daring Justice, Bold Discipleship and Deep Spirituality. I like that. The daring justice Jesus calls us to needs a deep spirituality which leads to bold discipleship. Howard Thurman reminds us that surrendering to God begins the change we need, where "Little by little, or vast area by vast area, [our lives are] transmuted." With God at our centre, we overcome the division within us, the back-and-forth that sees injustice yet resists the personal changes required to address it, that holds us back from reaching out to others working to address it too. There we find true freedom, letting go of control as we get closer to Jesus, grow as disciples, and as our new moderator Carmen Lansdowne suggested at her installation, approach him as a lens, and seek to see the world as he does. For me that's a good start because we carry that insight into our lives, helping us respond as Jesus would to issues in need of unsticking and joining others in the community and wider world who are doing the same.

Jesus' words seem harsh, but we need that sometimes. In many ways we face a world similar to that of the first disciples. Like them, we will face division as we advocate for a world built on justice and the unity we share. But as we heard last Sunday, we don't need to fear making waves. Jesus is with us, leading us in our love for others, as we seek their liberation. Amen.