

St James United Church

Message for August 28, 2022

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost



“Disruptive Collaboration”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jer. 2:4-13; Lk 14:1-14; Brian McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (NY: St. Martin's Essentials, 2022), 218, 219 and 220

Do you ever feel like we've collectively lost the plot? Sometimes I do. We live in an amazing world but it's suffering the impacts of climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss. We're in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis that has shown just how many of us live on a shoestring budget. Distrust in institutions is at an all-time high and we're increasingly divided politically. And much of these issues originate in countries whose populations claim to follow Jesus.

I wonder if Jesus looks at us and scratches his head, not unlike what he did in today's gospel as he watched other guests jockeying for position around the table, taking part in the patron-based economics of the Roman world as peers and those just above and below them used dinners to shore up their social position. Did he question why if they'd all grown up reading the same bible, and so must have known he was referring to Proverbs in his advice about taking a lower seat first, and so also knew the intent of the text was to help them nurture a just and collaborative society, why they were emulating not the law of Moses who led them from slavery but values of an empire like Egypt which they'd left behind? It must have felt like he was watching Jeremiah's words played in front of him, people of his community again choosing not living water but trying to quench their thirst at empty cisterns, choosing not the God of their ancestors but the god of their neighbours, and so in following after worthless things becoming worthless themselves.

Jeremiah's observation here is as significant as it is simple. I hear in it the echo of the advice we get from health experts when they say we are what we eat. In this context we become what we worship. As I began my reflection, I wondered aloud if we've lost our way. Among many issues we face, economics is top of mind for many. This isn't the world of my parents who saw the size of the middle class grow between the 1950s and 1970s, the North American dream of a house and a well-paying job within reach of many. In my adult years I've watched that dream slip away for the generations behind me, now expecting to be worse off rather than better off than their parents. Many working people feel left behind as wages have fallen relative to the cost of living, and good paying jobs moved offshore in our globalised world. A colleague observed that part of our problem is how religion's been side lined, leaving us without a moral commitment to care for each other to counter capitalism's greedier tendencies. His observation feels right on the money.

Thankfully all is not lost. Like Jesus who was guided by Torah, the Prophets, Wisdom teachings, we still have those scriptures as well as his teachings interpreting them to get us back on track.

In this I like the way McLaren invites us to emulate Jesus by working collaboratively with others who promote humility, kindness, and justice in what they do. In this I take to heart Jesus' call for us not to invite our peers to a banquet but those on society's margins. A few years ago, I saw Brian do just that at a conference in Phoenix. He is a big name, and a large crowd was there to hear him. He got up, then introduced an Indigenous man who spoke in his place on the history of Residential Schools in the US, on the role churches played, and the call to not only hear truth but in that knowledge to shift the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. I appreciated what he did to disrupt the status quo. We do that when we seek to collaborate with those historically left behind by our systems, including those of us who identify as Indigenous, Black, racialized, female, immigrant, disabled, gay, trans, and other groups.

One group overlooked in this call to collaborate is the working class. We need to take this last cluster seriously. Why? Because folks with a very different agenda than the humility, kindness and justice we associate with God's realm are doing just that. I recently read an article that looked at the rise of the far right in many parts of the world, North America included, with what happened in the economic crises of the 1930s. Sadly as we face our own economic issues, people again are looking for someone to blame, and are ready to follow whoever will tell them who they should. They use the language of making America or Canada or Britain or wherever it is great again, appearing to listen to people who legitimately feel left behind just as those historically on the margins seek redress for past injustices. They play them against one another, fomenting division where there should be unity.

I'm sure like me you've heard the rhetoric from working people tilting toward the far right. We saw them on TV last winter in front of Parliament and elsewhere. I hear them in coffee shops. We have them at our kitchen tables. I find it difficult to engage with them, not just because they say hateful things about LGBTQI+ folks, but also folks who are Indigenous, Black, Jewish, Muslim, disabled, women. But hard as it is, I need to hear their truth, the hurt beneath the talk. I need to hear out why they among many others feel let down by government, by church, by other institutions. Jesus invites us to work with others to again nurture a more collaborative and just society. To do this means not discounting anyone. As we listen, even if difficult, we find not just what divides us but what we share. Then together we can tackle the real issues facing us.

In some ways it feels like we have been worshipping the wrong gods and doing so to our peril. But that doesn't need to be how things stay, not if we take seriously the teachings of Jesus and collaborate across "divisions", listening both to those who have been historically marginalized, and those more recently so. It is collaboration that is disruptive, but only in how it disrupts our assumptions, not in working together. That is the heart of the way of Jesus. In this it also disrupts the status quo that keeps leaving people behind. That our society keeps doing that reveals all too well that we have left behind the collaborative way God taught the people in the wilderness, and ended up worshipping the gods of neighbouring empires and not the Living God. It doesn't need to be like this, not if we hear Jeremiah's call, not if we take Jesus' words to heart and follow not the way of empty cisterns but of living water that quenches the need of everyone to belong. Amen.