

St James United Church

Message for September 4, 2022
First Sunday in the Season of Creation



“More than Golems” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1:1-17; “The Hidden Singer” by Wendell Berry

On Friday morning I took Finley for a walk. It had poured rain and for all I knew it could bucket down again at any time. But right then it was drizzling, so I grabbed an umbrella and off we went. While I watched for future rain, Finley was in the moment, sniffing the ground for signs of other dogs, gleefully rolling in the damp grass. We were both wet when we returned but he didn't care. He's always in the now, present to what's going on. That's a dog's superpower.

Humans have a different superpower. The ancient Hebrews described it as being created in the image and likeness of God. That phrase can mean many things, one of which we explored during our learning together time. Humans are creative, called co-creators with God. We also are very conscious of the passage of time, so much so we draw on the past and use what we learned from it to not just plan, which other animals do to a degree, but imagine any number of possible futures. Humans are such masters of this we struggle with just being in the present.

It makes sense then that we also ascribe this to God. We see it in the Book of Jeremiah with God portrayed as referring to the past and pondering what the future might bring, depending on how the people respond in the present. Take what we heard this morning. God is described as a potter ready to shape a number of futures. Now we need caution here, this text, among others, has been used to teach really problematic ideas about divine judgement. More than a few preachers have pointed to natural disasters and terror attacks as punishment for everything from homosexuality to religious pluralism. As I found when squishing my bit of playdough earlier, the ability to do so can go to your head. Combine that with human vindictiveness and you see how those kinds of jumps get made. I find it more valid theologically to see the future not as divinely caused, but the result of our actions. Take the climate crisis. We avoid the severity of climate breakdown to the degree we draw down the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Repentance means changing your mind, and direction.

Whichever view one has, the bible suggests that we share in God's nature. In Jeremiah, God is imaged as a potter, but we encounter that idea first in Genesis, God creatively shaping humans from the ground, then animating them with divine breath. We need God's breath, or we are just golems, the soulless creatures of Jewish folklore made by human creators out of clay or soil and then brought to life using ritual incantations and sequences of Hebrew letters like the letter *shem*. It would be removed to deactivate the golem and so to let it rest. The most famous is the Golem of Prague formed in the 16th century by Rabbi Loew to protect the community from anti-Semitic violence. In the end it went on a murderous rampage when the

rabbi forgot to remove the letter *shem* before the Shabbat so it could rest like everyone else. Despite what's happening in the world, we're more than golems. We have capacity for more than mindless action, but to learn, to reflect, to use our desire for self-development and creativity to grow in relationship with God.

I find it is best for this to take my cue from Finley, that is to seek to be in the moment, attentive to whatever I'm experiencing, be it a conversation, beautiful music, a tasty meal, and especially when I'm in nature, perhaps not sniffing the ground but revelling in wet grass, really noticing a wildflower, attentive like Wendell Berry to the presence of a bird singing in a tree. Notice that all of those things are about being in our bodies, not mindlessly but intentionally aware. Doing this reconnects me to my body and gives me a chance to pause in gratitude and praise to God, the source of this body. It also reminds me I'm not alone but part of a wider and wilder whole.

I find that Paul's words to Philemon apply here. He wanted Philemon to see Onesimus in a new way, not for what he could do for him, but to honour that they were siblings, and so that Onesimus was as worthy of care as anyone else. Baptism affirmed a relationship that always was. I wonder if we are only truly ensouled when we see that, not just in terms of other humans but all life, all of creation. Otherwise we're golems, thoughtless as we consider only what a tree can be used for, don't really see it, let alone the rest of the forest and all the relationships we share in and through it. We end up like that, not thinking about the consequences of shaping the world like playdough, when we believe we're in control, the only ones animated with God's breath. But the ability of other animals, and plants, is a reminder of how much we share with them, and so need to care for them. Ultimately, we're most fully ourselves in relation to others, other humans, but also plants, animals, fungi, microbes, all other life and the planet itself.

We don't exist apart from any of it. And that I wonder is part of our dilemma too. We see ourselves as separate, even our souls as separate from our bodies, set to flee them for God in heaven. We feel disconnected from bodily experience animated by Spirit, from each other and all of life with which we share divine breath, from the planet where God is present. If that's the case, maybe that's why the Golem of Prague went on a rampage. When he didn't get to rest on the Shabbat, he also wasn't given a chance to ponder what he shared with others, didn't get the chance to have a soul. Maybe that is what is happening to us, we're losing our sense connection, losing our soul and so end up mindlessly harming rather than nurturing creation.

Thankfully, we do get to nurture our soulfulness as we pause today, and I pray we do so regularly, to take time in the moment to give thanks for our experiences, including the natural world. As we do, we recognize not just the gift of creation but the creator as well, not far away in heaven but around us, connecting us and nurturing us in love and calling us to do the same. As Wendell Berry suggests, God may not need our praise, but I need to offer it. When I pause, I reconnect to, and am reminded to care for, the rain, birds, trees, Finley rolling in the wet grass. In the moment I reconnect, I am more fully ensouled. And so are we all. Amen.