

St James United Church

Message for September 25, 2022
Welcome Sunday



“The Meaning of Faith”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 17:5-10; 1 Tim. 6:11-16; Excerpt from *You Are the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen

“Faith.” What is it? In church circles we often hear it said that “Faith is belief in something that can’t be proven.” And so, people often refer to articles of faith, lists of ideas to adhere to, like the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, or the Resurrection. We then add layers of belief on top of those, ways of interpreting them. Sadly, when someone questions any number of beliefs, they may feel that they can no longer be a part of their church, even if the friendships they formed there continue to be life-giving. I am thankful the United Church for the most part is not like that, that we’re not a dogmatic church but a wide tent of people who hold a variety of beliefs about God, some none at all but feel drawn to the sense of community and the chance to make a difference in the world.

I’m glad that’s who we are, even if some Christians question our faith. I think we should flip the question and ponder if the way “faith” is defined in church circles is correct. Consider the Latin equivalent, *fides*. It means “faith.” From it we get the word fidelity, a reminder that outside of church, faith refers to relationships of trust and love. And unlike in a church definition, we rely on proof to inform our faith in people. I have faith in Glen, learning by experience over twenty-one years together that he will stand by me with love and support, forgiving me when I have let him down. I trust him, pray he trusts me, our shared life proof of the faith we have in each other, and consequently of the faith that we can rely on in each other for love and support into the future.

What we share reminds me that the seat of faith isn’t the mind but the heart. It’s about relationship, including a relationship with one that many of us call God, the mystery at the heart of all life, holding all things in care, revealed in the life of Jesus, experienced both within and beyond us through the Spirit, her voice of guidance and strength often experienced through others. Those who identify as Christian, affirm that relationship is the heart of God, the teaching on Trinity a way to speak about God’s nature as one of community, inviting us into that same flow of love.

That’s the context I hear as Jesus speaks about faith the size of a mustard seed. He’s speaking not just of trust in, but collaboration with, God, the sense that together anything is possible. The idea brings me back to human relationships. Couples know well the impact of faith, or lack of it, on a relationship. When you trust each other, you can do so much, more than you can alone. But when that trust is frayed, you feel suspicious or unsure of a loved one’s motives, you can’t even do things well on your own, let alone together. And the same applies in wider relationships, like

on a team, at work, in a church. We support, teach, encourage, sometimes correct, often forgive each other, knowing that together we'll achieve what we put our minds to, more than on our own.

And the foundational value that informs this faith is love. The word "love" is overused in our culture. We diminish it by using it to speak of things that we like (I "love" caramel) or narrow it when we think of it in terms of being "in love". We make it about our feelings, but love is really a virtue, a value that we apply in our lives so that I love someone even if I feel hurt, don't like them very much right now but still seek the best for them, conscious there is more to them than one moment, even a series of moments. Love is really an action, something Paul speaks to in his First Letter to the Corinthians. We enact love when we're patient with one another, and kind; when we neither let envy of another nor pride about ourselves undermine the relationship, when we seek the good of others before bolstering our own power. Love rebuilds the relationship when hurt has occurred rather than brood over it. We know we are loving when we can insert our name in Paul's list, when I can say James doesn't delight over wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It's the core of the advice to Timothy, the eternal life he is called to grab, not a future heaven but this life lived with a desire to repair the brokenness of our world, to co-create with God to nurture just and right relationships, create equal access to what people need, to offer compassion in times of trial as well as joy in moments of celebration, to do more than offer charity but reshape how we live, all a hope for the way the world always should have been that sits at the centre of our hearts. In this we reveal our love for, and so our faith in God, in the love that we enact with, the faith that we show in, others.

Two-and-a-bit years ago we did just that. When the pandemic came, so many people stepped up, checking on neighbours, helping get groceries. When masks were suggested most of us put them on, because we were looking out for each other. As first responders doing superhuman work started to grow weary, people went outside, banged pots, and drew rainbows. And then when George Floyd was murdered during an arrest, people took to the streets to protest the disproportionate violence against Black, Indigenous and other racialized peoples. We pulled together because we were all in a storm, albeit in different boats. We did as we were called to do, not needing to be commended for it, as Jesus shared in his parable. And though cracks appeared later, our first response in 2020 showed what we're capable of, how we can make faith, make love our default. And we'll do the same again for our siblings impacted by Fiona, as well as in so many other places in our world. We do it because we have faith in one another.

We do it because we know that there is more to faith than an assent of our minds. After all the old English word for believe is *belove*, the true nature of faith resting in relationships, with God, yes, but lived out with each other, responding wherever there is a need in our neighbourhood and our world. When we do we discover as Henri Nouwen reminds us, the more you love, "the more easily you recognize your sisters and brothers in the strangers around you, [so that] the wider the community of your heart, the wider the community around you" will be. May we live that on this Welcome Sunday and every day, loving God by widening the community in the love that we share. Amen.