

# St James United Church

Message for October 16, 2022

Diversity Fair Sunday (19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)



“Doing Church” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8; Anecdote about a desert father as attributed to Marcel Driot in *The Desert, An Anthology for Lent* by John Moses

Hands up if you’ve played “Telephone”? It’s always fun to see how far the phrase first whispered will drift from the original, at least until you play a round and someone intentionally whispers to the next person a completely different phrase than what was whispered to them. We get a bit of “Telephone” in the gospels, stories changed in their telling and retelling, at times ending up quite different, dependent on which writer tells it, even with intentional phrase changes and additions.

This isn’t wrong per se, but we need to be aware of this as we read the bible, like this morning’s gospel passage. Luke adds a reason behind Jesus’ parable, but consider what happens when we hear it without one: “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, ‘Give me justice in this case against my adversary.’ For a while he refused but finally said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or respect people, but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming and embarrassing me.’ I hear a commentary on the state of the world and how we’re called to respond, persevering in seeking justice in a world indifferent to so many. And why should we do this? Because as Jesus goes on to comment, unlike the unjust judge, God respects people, hearing the cry of those seeking help, and calling on us to respond.

But when preceded with words about persisting in prayer, this is blunted. In fact as I’ve heard in more than a sermon or two, we’re tempted to equate God with the judge and end up turning God’s response to prayer into something arbitrary, hearing some, ignoring others, unintentionally reinforcing the social status quo of some in and others out, and turning the purpose of this life into keeping right with God in preparation for the next. Like I said, a bad experience of “Telephone”. It misses why we follow Jesus, why we gather as church, or as one author put it, why we go about churching. I like that approach, church as a verb, not a building or worship service or even a group of people who gather in a building to attend worship, but an embodying of the ministry of Jesus, for which we may have a building, join in worship, be a group of people, but with none of those things as ends in themselves but to help us go into the world and offer an alternative to the unjust judge, making visible the thrust of Jesus’ life and teaching.

I listened to a podcast recently that underscored this, Harvard Divinity School prof, Matthew Myer Boulton pointing to how we see this alternative in Jesus’ actions as well as his words, last week healing lepers, not long before that healing a man with dropsy, before that a woman with a

debilitating illness. Each time he tells them to go, not to join his church, but healing them, making them whole, so they could go churching, that is doing for others as he'd done, extending mercy, caring, compassion in a world quick to judge, exclude, ignore the needs of those of us who are struggling. In this he offers a teaching on Matthew 28 unlike anything I've heard, underscoring what extending mercy, compassion, caring really means. In Jesus' last words to the apostles, he tells them to go and make disciples of all nations. We usually hear it as a call to form the church, to not only form a group of believers but bring more and more people into it until everyone's Christian, and, for the most part, "saving" them for a heavenly afterlife. Instead, Boulton poses the idea that perhaps we are called not so much to make disciples "of" but "from" all nations. Jesus thus invites us to church (the verb), to extend the same mercy, compassion, caring that he did without judgement, exclusion, indifference to others' needs, and so to ensure there is room at the world's table for all comers. This is an important principle in his ministry. As I said earlier, we live in a world with those who know secret handshakes and those who don't, even in church with members, insider terms, practices. And yet Jesus often pointed to so-called outsiders as those who under-stood the way of God's love, often better than those "in the know". In this he challenges the status quo and invites us to do so too, gathering in mutual love, but in order to go out and nurture a world where everyone's needs are met, especially when burdened by injustice.

Which brings us back to the parable's introduction. I need to persevere in prayer, in my spiritual life, because following Jesus can be hard, especially when the world competes with the gospel and I start questioning why we need mercy, compassion, caring for those struggling the most. I heard an Eastern Orthodox priest describe the spiritual life this way: it's like I come out of the sun into a dark room with a candle at one end. I can't see anything but in time I see more clearly, including my failings, especially as I get closer to the flame. The image reminds me I'm a work in progress, that it takes time to grow closer to God. This is where having fellow believers helps, mentors in taking Jesus' life and teachings to heart. As we do, Jeremiah's words are fulfilled, God's word written in us, Spirit helping us see as God does and so share love without exclusion.

As we do this, the end of the parable comes into play. We put what we discover in prayer into action, like the widow, persevering for justice, asking why many equity seeking groups, including those here in the Diversity Fair, struggle for their cries to be taken seriously. In this prayer and justice go together, or as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it as he walked alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights, justice is praying with our feet. I again hear church as verb, reminding me that the mission of Jesus wasn't about getting things right with God, but putting things right in our world, something we do across faith, culture, sexuality, race, gender, ability, everyone "churching" with mercy, compassion and love.

At times the bible is like a game of "Telephone" but the contrasts between stories are to keep us asking questions, grappling not so much with God as what we're called to in the world. As we do may we keep one constant, God cares for all people, and calls us to genuinely do the same. Amen.