

St James United Church

Message for October 30, 2022

All Saints / Reformation Sunday



“Living as beloved Community”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 19:1-10; Excerpt from Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*

Earlier this week our Governor General received the first Remembrance Day poppy of the year, and so began the annual period of honouring our veterans. It is a poignant time as we recall with heavy hearts the tragedy of war and pray for an end to armed conflict. We also pause in gratitude for sacrifices made by men and women who stepped forward when needed, heroes and heroines yet also just ordinary people responding in an extraordinary time. Each November, we also mark All Saints Day, giving thanks for all who came before us, not only “saints” declared such by the church, but our unnamed forebears, equally enjoying eternal communion with God, a great cloud of witnesses extending from Adam and Eve to Jesus’ disciples and to our own family members.

We mark this day, although as Protestants we don’t officially canonize saints like the Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Anglicans do. It’s more historical for us. We name churches after saints, usually apostles like Paul, occasionally James, or national patrons like David, and though not affixed with “St.”, honour great thinkers like Augustine or reformers like Knox or Wesley. We speak admiringly about popular saints like Mary Magdalene, Francis, or Jesus’ mother, Mary. Yet there is hesitance too. In some ways it’s theological, not wanting to presume who may actually share heavenly union, but more so it feels personal. We’ll name who inspires us, often in terms of the heroic, saints living extraordinary lives of holiness, but stop short when we look at ourselves.

I find this odd given that at this time of year we also mark Reformation Day, remembering the movement that among other things lifted up the primacy of the bible. We read in it about a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews), and a multitude in white robes praising the Lamb (Revelation) but much more often the word “saints” is used by Paul, and not for the few, extraordinary or heroic, but for ordinary members of the churches. They weren’t extraordinary, but in a sense the source of their holiness was, coming not from them but through grace, so that they participated in the honour of God’s glory, sealed with the Spirit to share in the inheritance of Christ. That’s how it’s expressed in Ephesians, not just “extraordinary” members blessed to share in God’s energy, but all of them saints, and by extension, us too, not flying with the angels but in the world, our home.

Believe it or not, this foundational point of Protestant theology is in the reading about Zacchaeus. It’s not evident in the way we usually read the story. We view Zacchaeus as corrupt but that his meeting with Jesus brought about a great conversion. Yet we hear it this way because translators choose to render his statements about giving away his possessions or compensating the

defrauded, in the future tense, as “I will”, not a more accurate “I have”. This bias has sadly reinforced our sense of who is saintly and who is not, we too needing a moment of extraordinary conversion in order to be saints.

But what if something else is going on? The name Zacchaeus means “pure”. Despite protests by the crowd, I don’t believe his work made him especially impure, at least not if he used his wealth to assist the poor and paid four times over to anyone cheated by those working for him. In these ways, he was living according to Torah, trying to live nobly within his profession not despite it. So rather than a conversion, I think the punchline comes before the “I have” as Jesus stands by the sycamore tree. He looks up at him, then says “Zacchaeus come down.” Remember, this chief tax collector was short, likely looked down on his whole life, perhaps the reason he became a tax collector. But here Jesus gave him the respect he sought in his job, saw him for him, recognized the honour he had as a child of Abraham, an honour he shared with everyone else. Then Jesus invited him to let go of the need to lord it over others and to relate to them on equal footing, and relate to Jesus likewise. Jesus could then “come to his house”, that is they could be in relationship. Jesus invited him to go deeper, to be in communion with him, with others and so with God.

Jesus does the same with each of us, coming to our house that we too can grow as saints. On occasion this may be an instantaneous “aha” but more often our relationship with him deepens with time, and as this happens our relationship with others deepens too. In this we’re the Body of Christ, his beloved community, “saints”, not just for who we may become but as we are, looked up to and loved as Zacchaeus was. This I believe is what changes us, and then following Jesus’ lead, we in turn love “the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart”, all hearts, called to nurture equity and respect as we look up to people who so often are lorded over.

I give thanks for this call for us to be “saints”, a call that doesn’t end within these walls. As we read in Ephesians, “Christ fills everything in every way,” I hear an invitation for all of humanity, all of creation, to be joined in beloved community, “saints” across faith, culture, even species. We need this sense of purpose today, as much as they did, perhaps more so, than in the years leading up to the great wars. Much is happening globally because one group looks down on another, hence a rise in anti-Semitism, the war in Ukraine, transphobic laws, people in the Global South impacted disproportionately by climate change, the humanitarian crisis in Haiti part of two hundred years of being lorded over economically to discourage other enslaved people from rising up. It is discouraging. Yet when I remember that Christ fills everything, I trust that in grace we are becoming beloved community. In fact we see it happening, people reaching out to help in a crisis, forming human chains in solidarity for justice, sharing in a spirit of equity and of love.

So, on this All Saints Sunday, let’s be the saints we celebrate. I realize that we have been taught to see ourselves as corrupt, in need of conversion rather than that the Spirit is alive in us. But in this season of remembering, I pray that we stop waiting for a “saintly” hero to come to help us. She’s here in us, ordinary people but extraordinary through grace, called into, and to nurture, beloved community for all. Amen.