

St James United Church

Message for January 22, 2023

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

“Called into Beloved Community”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23; Excerpt from “Loving Your Enemies”, a sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama on November 17, 1957

I find few scenes in the gospels more evocative than the one we heard as Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee, speaking first to Peter and Andrew, then to James and John, and each time they immediately leave everything to follow him. There is no tearful goodbye, no hesitancy. They just walk away from their work, their families, their life, all on the word of a total stranger.

It's evocative in part because it seems unlikely, and as a result I've heard plenty of preachers try to justify what happened by imagining a prior meeting with Jesus that influenced their decision. It's a shame we do this. It's a shame I did it, doing so in part, I admit, to mask my own hesitancy to take Jesus' message to heart. Thankfully, there are some who have felt the same urgency as Peter, Andrew, James and John. I think of Francis of Assisi who left his family and all of its wealth and status after he had a vision of Jesus calling him to rebuild his church. He did so with an alternative to the power structure of medieval Christianity, creating a community of what he called friars, that is brothers. Like Jesus and his disciples, Francis' friars were itinerant preachers sharing everything in common in a time when life was a struggle for most with only the few at the top benefitting. They did so to show that an alternative to the dominant systems of the world was possible. I see a similar urgency in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He called the alternative approach that Francis pointed to as the beloved community, an extension of what I spoke about last week, not only each of us God's beloved, but sharing that as siblings and so living justly out of a loving concern for one another.

Sadly, that's not the world Jesus was born into, not under the Romans, nor is it yet our own if we're honest. This is the point Matthew makes linking Jesus' withdrawal to Galilee to Isaiah's prophecy. As it was eight hundred years before when Galilee was under the Assyrian empire, the land was occupied by a foreign power, their situation under Rome as shadowed by strife and injustice as centuries earlier. It's why Jesus left Judea. John had been arrested in part for preaching against the tax burden everyone struggled under. In 1986 archaeologists found out just how heavy when they discovered a fishing boat of the period that was a mishmash of ten different woods. It suggested that fishers were so poor they repaired boats with scraps. The decision of the four men doesn't seem so strange then. Perhaps it was less about what they were called from as to. Jesus gave them hope of a new way of being together than Rome's.

And yet the Roman way could be hard to pull away from, hence Paul's frustrations with the Christians in Corinth. Though located in Greece, Corinth was very much a Roman colony,

rebuilt under the authority of Julius Caesar a few decades prior. A defining mark of Roman society was hierarchy, various classes divided from each other. And it would seem that the Corinthians weren't about to walk away from it, claiming sub-affiliations to Cephas, Apollos or Paul, rather than seeing their unity in Christ. If I may paraphrase Dr. King in remarks that he made about legislated desegregation versus the integration that we really need for a more just, equal and loving world, the Christians in Corinth were a church where elbows may have been together, but their hearts were still very much apart.

Paul was right then to suggest they hadn't taken to heart the wisdom of the cross, a wisdom that in many ways we still don't understand. It wasn't understood in the thirteenth century when Francis heard the call to rebuild the church through simplicity, nor between then and the mid-twentieth century when Dr. King preached non-violent resistance, committed to the belief that the chain of hate can't be cut with more of the same. Love, a just and inclusive love, is the heart of the gospel. It's the wisdom of the cross Paul preached, but I often hear a different message. I'm sure at some point you've seen an image of the cross lying over a chasm. On one side is us and on the other is God. The cross is said to form a bridge so that we can be reunited with God. I struggle with this idea because it assumes there is a division between us and God that needs to be overcome, despite the witness of God's claim on all of us in last week's readings. And it assumes the division continues unless we each accept Jesus, and what he did for us, a notion that makes Christianity exclusive and not a unifying teaching as Paul suggests. When I turn the image on its side all I see are two rungs of a ladder. In fact, I recently saw a ladder added as an upright to the so-called bridge of the cross. That image admits, although by accident, that our theology rather than challenging our world's structure as Jesus did, gives it credence. We just placed God atop a Roman hierarchy. No wonder the world is still a pyramid with most people struggling under its weight. All we've done is used the lens of the Roman world to interpret the cross rather than be converted by its witness.

But what if we look at the cross instead as Celtic peoples did, with the four beams intersecting a circle? This recognizes that the cross is intended not so much to bridge a gap between heaven and earth but to heal whatever divides us, the cross reaching in all directions to embrace people of every faith and land. This cross invites us to see the world as God does. If we imagine God is above, from that vantage point there is no hierarchy, no pyramid, just a circle. Jesus spent his life revealing that view, in fact, it is why he died. Those atop the pyramid were fearful for their power if people took to heart Jesus' circular world, God not above it but at its centre, inviting all of us into mutual relationship, a world where we care for one another as siblings regardless of any other identity or difference.

As I look at our present world, it strikes me that those at the top, us included globally, are in many ways still fearful. I get that. Hence my previous preaching. But if we are honest, the way of Rome has been tried for twenty-five years and found wanting. We need another way, perhaps Jesus' way of beloved community. It's a way of hope that calls us from conflict to peace, from indifference to compassion, from hatred to love, from division and hierarchy to the circle of siblinghood. I pray that we finally answer that call. Amen.