

St James United Church

Message for January 29, 2023

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

“Called to Belove the World”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12; “Just Beyond Yourself” by David Whyte

Over the last two weeks, we’ve explored the idea of being beloved, first, each of us sharing in that claim to Jesus in his baptism, then extending it as a community, living together what we wish for society as a whole. But it doesn’t stop there. We are also called to belove the world.

Now as I say that I know that loving the world has not always been a Christian default. Despite the ubiquitous presence of John 3:16 signs at sporting events, the church hasn’t always “so loved the world” as God is said to do, in fact quite the opposite. Traditionally there are three main approaches that we’ve taken in regard to the world, expressed in how Christ relates to it – in the world, against the world, and above the world. Most often the approach we have taken is anti-world, so that we either judge it, conceding elements may be good but for the most part asserting that the world is tainted with sin and needing redemption, or believing that it’s so far gone we need to remove ourselves from it like the Amish. Not a whole lot of loving the world.

To a degree, this is understandable given what Jesus names in our gospel. You aren’t blessed for poverty of spirit unless you’re materially poor and that’s crushed your spirit; blessed within your grief unless too many of your loved ones have died needlessly; blessed for thirsting for justice unless you regularly experience oppression; blessed for being meek unless you are harshly ruled over. And yet as Jesus names these sins, he doesn’t start with judgment as we have so often done as church. Rather Jesus lifts up the individuals experiencing these realities and reminds them they are beloved, are children of God, held in God’s compassionate care.

By starting with love, Jesus, like a parent, shows us how to nurture the world we want. It’s easy to judge the world but it doesn’t change anything. Parents know this, know that the best way to bring lasting change in a child is to applaud the good rather than berate the bad. It often feels counterintuitive, but focusing on what you want to discourage can reinforce it. How? Because both adults and children want to be affirmed, we will all seek negative attention rather than get none at all. In addition, parents know they can encourage the behaviour they want by modelling it. A good gauge of children being loving, respectful and helpful is their having parents who are consistently loving, respectful and helpful. Jesus understood this and lived it.

This to me is where Paul’s “wisdom of the cross” comes in. As I shared last Sunday, we often frame the cross in terms of judgment, that is we have sinned and deserve punishment, Jesus taking this on himself to restore our relationship with God, the cross forming a bridge between us and God. But this approach reinforces self-doubt. Then as we act out of this negative self-

image, we amplify the issues that we're judging. A much older interpretation of the cross than this is that Jesus modelled who God is, first in his life and then in his death, not angry but loving, not ready to punish as to give his life for others. The main dilemma of our world is that it's built around victors, seen in the hierarchies I spoke of last week. But again, that is not God's view. And so God takes a cruel act and "foolishly" turns it into a lesson of love. From the cross Jesus shows us the perspective of the victim. In choosing to be a victim in Jesus, God lifts up all victims, calls them all beloved, and in the process flips all hierarchies on their head.

In this I experience the model of engagement we've followed least as a church, namely that of Christ in the world. In this, Christ first of all comes alongside us, especially those of us who've been victimized, and offers not just compassion but solidarity. Jesus calls the grieving person blessed because he stands with her, something we're called to do when we model ourselves after him. On Friday I attended Beth El Synagogue for their service marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It was heartbreaking to hear them read aloud the names of family members who died in the death camps, equally to hear their fear as they reported that on that same day eight people had been killed in Israel as they left a synagogue. As we stand with the Jewish Community, Jesus stands with them through us. He does likewise with the Black community as they grieve Tyre Nichols and protest the police beating that caused his death, does the same with Indigenous peoples as Williams Lake First Nation finds yet more unmarked graves. This is Christ in the world, loving it through compassionate solidarity, especially anyone who's been victimized, who is hurting as a result.

And difficult as it is, Christ loving the world includes our "enemies", those who have done the hurting, something we seem to have more of an increasingly polarized world. This may be one more thing to judge or we can handle it with love. A month ago as we celebrated Christmas, we likely spoke with loved ones, some who had hurtful, even racist, sexist, or other viewpoints. So what do we do? My gut response is to argue with them. Some of you may ignore them. But what if instead we sought out what we have in common? Again with Jesus with us, in love we can listen to what has shaped their views, and the deeper hurt that often informs them. Let's return to my earlier example of Beth El. As I sat there and heard about the Jews who'd been shot, I was also conscious of the nine Palestinians killed by Israeli forces that week. I could have closed off my heart, thinking of the hypocrisy. But I needed to be open. I oppose the occupation of Palestine and worry about the tilt to the far right in Israel, but I needed to listen in love to the ongoing grief, and to the fear of another Holocaust, especially with a global rise in anti-Semitism. I listened for a shared value, in this case self-preservation. Acknowledging what we share is key if we want to nurture trust and foster dialogue. We will still disagree on issues but having differences doesn't mean we need to be enemies. When we listen with love, we create space for all people to come together and to cooperate for the common good.

Beloved, in the end it is all about love, and when we really love, we live into where we want to be, looking to the road on the horizon as two sides merge into one. That is our future if we can approach the world as God does, not with judgment but with love. When we do, when we truly love the world, then all the world will be blessed. Amen.