

St James United Church

Message for February 12, 2023

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

“Going Deeper” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37; James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp 134-35

Blame it on today being two days before Valentine's Day but I've been thinking a lot about relationships lately, and more than just in the romantic sense. Rather I've been pondering them theologically and how they're at the heart of Jesus' teaching about God's Reign, his teaching about how the kingdom of heaven has come near.

I hear them in his series of “You've heard it said...but I say to you” statements, words which we may find harsh, or may be tempted to write off as exaggeration, when he says even being angry at someone is punishable or looking at them lustfully is being adulterous. I feel that sometimes too, and yet I hear him speaking not just in terms of “law” but going deeper, inviting us to centre values of respect, trust, faithfulness, forgiveness, equanimity in our lives, values through which relationships can flourish.

It seems to me that part of our struggle is translation, rendering Torah into English as Law when it also means instruction or Teaching. This situation is compounded when we hear Jesus say at the end of last week's gospel reading that not even a jot or tittle will be erased from Torah and the Prophets until they're fully realized. And so historically the church has focused on more legalistic pieces of the Scriptures, and missed where the story is going, leading to two main reactions, for people to point to individual parts of the bible and demand we follow every word (we all know people like that) or toss everything out because the “laws” are too limiting (we all know those people too).

When I react in either way, I betray myself as what Paul complained about, spiritually immature, only able to handle milk rather than to eat solid food, in other words, only ready to receive what someone else tells me to believe, rather than to think it through for myself. But we need to. This is why I have started attending a Torah study on Saturday mornings, relishing the Jewish practice of wrestling with a text, looking at it and applying it into new contexts. A tenet of Judaism is the belief that when the divine revelation was made at Sinai, every Jew who'd ever live was there along with those alive at the time. This is a core belief because Torah is identity shaping. But more than that it reminds us that Torah is a living revelation, applied anew for each generation, interpreted in evolving ways as contexts also change. This is key wisdom beyond Judaism. We can easily get stuck, wanting to keep the “law” fixed in place, to keep what we do fixed as well. Why else do we so often hear the phrase “we've always done it this way” across congregations?

No wonder a few chapters later, Jesus challenges some Pharisees, saying “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.” Torah, the gospel, prayers, rituals, buildings,

policies, always have one purpose, for people to flourish. So Jesus expanded what he was taught, invited his listeners to think through the Sinai revelation and to apply in our context its core purpose of loving God in the way we love ourselves and others. And yet we struggle to do the same. Here's an example. Just after where today's gospel leaves off, Jesus takes the teaching about an eye for an eye and flips it. Yet people take the original teaching and don't even take into account what Jesus says about anger or reconciliation but argue for capital punishment, abolished here in 1976. They say something like "It says in the good book, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, so if you take someone's life, you forfeit your own." The trouble with the statement is it ignores the culture in which the instruction was given wherein if someone was killed, their family responded ten times over, killing the other family in retribution. The original teaching was part of an evolution in how we are to treat each other, intended to move us away from deepening conflicts through escalating violence and so to make room for reconciliation. Instead we use it to perpetuate the violence.

That even now a desire for retribution over reconciliation is so pronounced underscores Paul's affirmation that it is God who does the growing not us. Thankfully we have seasons of reflection like Lent, only ten days away, to take time in prayer, to not only go deeper with the scriptures, but with ourselves, and to ponder how we're living out their purpose. Maybe we are holding on to anger or hurt, or we have habits or unexamined biases that are holding us back from reaching out to others. Or maybe we have tapped into a capitalist model of good work, and so are working so hard to make the world better that we aren't taking care of ourselves or our families, forgetting that the injustices and hurts we want to resolve will still be there tomorrow and so we need to get some rest. Or maybe we have become cynical about the state of the world, and need to take some time to dream, to not focus on what's wrong but give thanks for what's right even as we hope for greater peace and caring. Whatever it is, I'm grateful we have a season coming up for us to pause, to take time in prayer and study, to think through Torah, the Prophets, and the Gospel for ourselves and consider how to live them in our context, centred on relationships of love and not just obeying the "law".

When we do this, we model ourselves after Jesus. Like any Jew, he honoured Torah and the Prophets as a living revelation. He understood that the narrative was tending toward greater inclusivity, mercy and justice, and so wrestled with parts of it that were not, doing so because he understood that the world too, in God's grace, is supposed to move from a kingdom to a kin-dom where everyone can flourish. As his followers we are to do the same, to look for where the world is exclusionary, or punitive, and so to align ourselves, as Dr. Cone put it, with the work of healing wounds and striking off chains, and not just on our own but with whoever else is doing that work. We may not always get it right but we can do our best as we apply the scriptures in our lives by nurturing relationships that are respectful, forgiving, trusting and just.

After all, beloved, that is our purpose not just in preparation for Valentine's but everyday. We are called as disciples of Jesus to take his lead, to not only read the bible but go deeper and apply its Teaching in a way so that all people can flourish, everyone from ourselves to our families, from our neighbourhoods to the world. As we do, the kin-dom of heaven will come near. Amen.