

# St James United Church

Message for May 7, 2023

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“A Way or a Wall?”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 14:1-14; 1 Peter 2:2-10



Have you ever tried learning a new language? It's challenging, isn't it? One frequent concern is pronunciation. It is common for a new speaker to place the emphasis on the wrong syllable, as they say. This happened when I moved to Ontario after living on the Prairies. When learning a land acknowledgement for the area, my instinct was to pronounce Haudenosaunee, the word for Iroquois, as Haudenosaunee as if the word was Cree, an Indigenous language with which I'm more familiar. It is still worth learning a new language though, because language carries culture and so offers a way into another worldview.

The same is true of sacred texts. They too carry a worldview and are best understood when this is taken into account. If not you can end up with, shall we say, spiritual mispronunciation when you emphasise a different textual “syllable” than the one wanted by the writer. We see this in John's gospel, written with a Jewish focus on our relationship with God and the community, and how it is expressed in action, but then it was read through a Greek lens with its philosophy tradition and the importance of intellectual assertions. Take today's gospel portion, especially as Jesus says “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It is often taken out of context, especially without reference to the beginning of the chapter as Jesus says that his Father's house has room enough to spare, an image that has always spoken to my heart of the breadth of God's merciful and welcoming love, and definitely without reference to the rest of the gospel as time and again Jesus reached out to those outside of the mainstream. With an emphasis on intellectual assent rather than lived relationship, the line can be used to say that everyone must profess belief in Jesus in order to be “saved”. So much for last week's image of Jesus as a gate. He's turned into a wall, not a way for many but a barrier for all but the few in the church.

Seeing the text this way has led to historic injustices, a reality I found it difficult not to think about, beautiful as the ceremony was, as King Charles was crowned yesterday. I am sure many of you, like me, not only watched at least part of the coronation but watched the media coverage in the days prior. In this there were hopeful stories, like King Charles meeting with the elected representatives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. I loved how Cassidy Caron, Métis National Council President, used an image of how a relationship forms over a hundred cups of tea and she felt like this was the first cup. King Charles also agreed to open royal vaults so

historians can study connections between the monarchy and chattel slavery. These gestures are not just hopeful, they're historic. But they're historic because of the trauma and harm colonialism brought to so many distinct peoples and cultures, especially, in the context of those stories, for Indigenous and African peoples.

I realize that speaking about this is troubling, all the more so when we realize that what happened was given religious justification. People were "allowed" to be displaced or enslaved because they weren't Christian, a practice based in part on faulty interpretation of today's gospel reading. But what if we read it as a Jewish John intended? Remember that a Jewish focus is on action as we live in relationship to God and each other. The opening is important here, Jesus was worried for his friends and wanted to assure them that even though he would no longer be with them in body, he'd be with them in the relationships they shared. When they held to each other, they'd discover that he was still with them, drawing them to God as he'd always done, helping them to follow his way of loving justice and peace so that everyone can not just know but experience that they are loved by God. When we draw close to Jesus in this way, we discover God is close as well. And why wouldn't that be the case? Jesus tells Philip that to see him is to see the Father. A big part of this is seeing God in action through the loving justice and peace at the heart of God's Reign, a reign Jesus modelled and invites us to do also.

And when we live into God's Reign, God's way of love, we are formed into a house of living stones as Peter writes, God present both with us and also through us, not just those who profess belief in Jesus, but anyone who makes God visible as Jesus did in how they live. In this way we are an extension of what God called Israel to be, a holy nation modelling God's loving justice and peace in the world. To do this I take inspiration from Cassidy Caron's words about forming a relationship through a hundred cups of tea. Our ancestors in faith read John 14 using a different cultural lens than was originally intended and as a result gave credence to the colonial project that traumatised so very many people. But we can start over by having the first of many cups of tea, or as said among the Mi'kmaq p'tewei, or sagya if we were in Ghana,, taking time to listen, and to learn and so to love. And as we do God will be close, as close as when we share communion, as we will soon do this morning.

Beloved, learning a new language can be challenging, especially when the language is God's way of loving justice and peace. But we're not on our own in this. We have Jesus with us, a native speaker who came to teach it to us. And he continues to show us, present with us as we seek again and again to embody his way. So, let's keep speaking his words, keep living his love, his justice, his peace. We will mispronounce things at times but he's there through the Holy Spirit correcting us as needed. We won't go wrong if we keep speaking with love. Amen.