

St James United Church

Message for May 14, 2023
Sixth Sunday of Easter/Mother's Day



“Judge or Advocate?”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 14:15-21; Ephesians 4:1-2, 24 and 31-32; “The Raincoat” by Ada Limón

Over these weeks of Easter, we have been reflecting together on how this season invites us to look at who we are differently, God calling us back to being the interconnected community that we were created to be. In this we've looked at who Jesus is, reframing his role in getting us there. But there is one more piece of the puzzle we need to consider. Who is God in all of this?

It may be a challenging question because many of us were taught to think about God in terms of power and authority, and often through a lens of fear. This came up this week in bible study, a participant reacting to Jesus saying, “If you love me, you'll keep my commandments.” We had an interesting conversation about it, including about parenting and how common it once was to hear someone say “I'm going to put the fear of God into you” if their child misbehaved. I'm thankful that isn't the dominant way children are taught now. Fear can have a long-term negative impact on children's development, and can breed anger and mistrust between parents and their children. It also impacts how we see the world. The more we fear, the more we look for things to fear. We see this with news coverage and the tendency to lead with stories that shock us. We end up with an increasingly negative sense of the world around us. I find that it impacts me as well. I take Finley for a walk, and we pass someone who is, like my neighbourhood, a bit rough around the edges. I end up writing them off as up to no good even though I don't know them at all. And when the church stokes that fear, we have not just a negative view of the world but of God too. Given that truly terrible things happen in the world, we're left to conclude God is either cruelly punishing us or powerless, so helpless in our need.

But is that really God? Not if we pay attention to what Jesus says in today's gospel portion as he promises to send the Spirit as an Advocate, namely someone called alongside another to help, often in court, but also in healthcare, or school, or anywhere a person needs assistance in a system that tends to work against rather than for them. That image reminded me of an experience I had when I was about six and the only time I recall getting spanked. It was a school day and my mom needed to get groceries shortly after I got home. It was June and there were some really juicy strawberries for sale. I loved strawberries, still do, so when my mom wasn't looking I snuck one into my mouth. I tried eating it without her noticing, but she did. She was so upset she cut her shopping short, took us home and straight to my room. She asked if I knew why she was upset and needed to be punished. I said yes. Then she asked if I'd had gym that day and still had shorts on under my jeans. Again, I said yes. She was relieved because though she felt she had to spank me for stealing she didn't want to hurt me.

In that moment, as much as she thought she was to mete out God's judgement, she was an advocate, wanting the best for me, to encourage and help me rather than judge or punish me. What if this who God is? A defendant coming alongside us, and not arguing for us before God, (that would be odd given that the Spirit is part of the Trinity so God would be arguing with God) but helping us to embody Jesus' command to love in what seems like a less than loving world.

And perhaps it only seems to be a less than loving world. Again, I think about my mom. As I recall my childhood there were bad things that happened. I got chicken pox when I was two, fell down the stairs a year later, three years beyond that became a strawberry thief, and as you know three years beyond that my mom died. None of those things denied her love for me. In my life more good came my way than bad, and the same is true of the world, more a place of goodness and grace than of hurt or harm. Our planet is perfectly placed in the solar system, thus able to support abundant life, rich in food for all types of creatures, even if this means some are prey, as a species we're communal animals so our lives are gifted with many diverse relationships, over millennia we've created one amazing civilization after another. Yes, there are sources of sadness, more often caused by other humans than the make-up of the planet, but we are much more blessed in this life. The trouble is that we focus on the negative and end up taking all the blessings for granted, like Ada Limón before she watched a mom take off her raincoat to keep her child dry in a storm, and she became aware of all that her mother had done for her, things she never much thought about growing up.

Her epiphany reminds me that God isn't punishing or powerless. We just focus on negatives, and ignore how much God blesses us through the world, advocates for us in how we treat each other. It's a quirk in our psychology. Negatives are stickier in our memory than positives, including the things people say to us. One study I read suggested we need as many as ten positive comments to balance one negative. Thank goodness for places where people affirm us, where their instinct is more like my mom's and advocate for rather than judge us. That's what Christian community is about as we live the qualities the author of Ephesians speaks of, being kind and tender-hearted, qualities lived out as we saw in the video about "Our Place" in Victoria, a ministry similar to Stella's Circle or the Gathering Place here in St. John's as they give folks in need a place of warmth and respect, qualities attested to at St. James where a newcomer commented how truly welcome they feel, people making a point of saying hello, or a young person coming to terms with their gender identity pointed out our steps to their mom saying, "That church gets who I am." Well done church. When we do these things we're how God advocates, lifting up others and helping us notice how good this world really is.

Beloved, God calls us to be the interconnected community we're created to be, a call grounded in love, not fear. Love is the command Jesus asks us to keep, so critical in a world where negatives can pull us down and can pull us apart. So may we love like my mom, like most moms I know, as advocates not judges. And when we do, God is mothering the world back into interconnected community through us. May we keep loving like that. Amen.