

St James United Church

Message for July 30, 2023

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

“Hiding in Plain Sight” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-46



It must have been preparing for today's baptism, but as I reflected on the bible readings this week I kept thinking about my first ministry position in the United Church in 2006. The church was in Edmonton and my title was Minister of Congregational Care, a role combining seniors' ministry with one focused on families, children and youth. As you'd imagine, it was a challenge to focus on the needs of people at very different stages of life. But I loved the role in large part because while they were in different stages physically they had much in common spiritually, both very open to God's presence.

I found this to be very true of children, though they were less able to articulate it than those who were older. We created a chapel area for them where we'd explore the bible readings in an age-friendly way. We'd pray together too and the look on their faces... let's just say they didn't need much help connecting with God. I'm sure they could have taught me a thing or two. I suspect there are a few reasons for this. First, children live more in the present moment than those of us who are older, and that's where we meet God, in the moment, close as our heart. Next, I find they're open to being surprised, everything they experience a "wow" moment. God is very much experienced in our sense of wonder and gratitude. Finally, because they're still developing a sense of individual autonomy, they're not yet as guarded by their ego as we are in adulthood. That's when we can encounter God, when the walls of our hearts come down.

Now, I'm sure you are wondering what this has to do with our readings. Surprisingly, quite a lot. In our gospel, we hear four parables about God's Reign, each a pair of related images. The first two speak to children in an obvious way, mustard seeds and yeast both small but growing over time. But that isn't really the connection I'm thinking about. Rather, you need to pair them with the other two about finding something precious, either unexpectedly or searched for over a lifetime. All four have an element of being hidden, most obviously the treasure in the field but also the seed that's planted in the ground, the yeast that's kneaded into dough, the pearl once hidden in an oyster, and it possible because of an irritant like sand slowly hidden in nacre.

Our spiritual lives are about seeking what is hidden, or more to the point finding again what was obvious as children but becomes increasingly buried in our lives as we get busy, more knowledgeable, a bit cynical, feel let down by life's inevitable sorrows. When we're first born we don't see ourselves as distinct but as an extension of our moms, or should I say she's an extension of us. As we grow, we gain awareness of separation, essential to our development,

but it comes at a cost. We gain an ego to defend our independence, protect feelings of rightness, reinforce differences between the group we identify with and others, all ways by which that easy connection with God and others, that sense of wonder about life, the natural world, the spiritual openness we're born with, can get covered over time.

Fortunately, all is not lost, not when we turn to our Torah reading. The story about Jacob, Leah and Rachel is troublesome, but at its core is one truth – Jacob loves Rachel. As I ponder that in regard to the parables, I see God in Jacob, waiting to be with Rachel, be with us. I take comfort in that, God waiting as long as it takes for us to find them like a treasure. We are reminded of that treasure through the children in our lives, when we watch how spiritually open they are, amazed at life, ready to connect with others, not see differences just possible friends. A child can even see a mustard tree as a friend. God always hides in plain sight, there when we're in the moment, grateful for what's before us.

What's key for those of us who are adults, especially middle-aged ones with life complicating the way we approach God, spirituality, faith, is that we can cultivate the openness of children just by being more amazed at life, ready for thankful wonder. In her book on spirituality and parenting, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg reflects on the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that the root of spirituality is radical amazement about our lives. We often think of mountaintop experiences – an amazing vista, a whale breaching, but she reminds us that we can experience awe and wonder in the everyday as children do, be it “flowers on the side of the road; the taste of ice cream in our mouths; ...warm soapy water on our hands as we wash dishes.” I love that. God is waiting to be found like a pearl in our ordinary lives. And what's more, God often doesn't wait but reaches out to us in the love we experience, especially with our spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings, our fellow congregants, our friends.

For those of us who are older, none of this is news. That's what I've learned from the more senior among us. Time and again I've been told that aging is hard, especially the loss of independence. My dad told me that more than once. But he also reminded me how there's a gift in it because you have more time to just be rather than work 24-7, time to savour ice cream or rejoice in a tree. And as a body weakens so does the attachment of our ego, and we have more God moments, more connect-with-others moments, more see-past-differences-to-see-what-we-share-in-common moments. All possible because God is with us even when we aren't paying attention, taking the advantage of time to leaven us through.

Beloved, today is a special day as we celebrate the baptism of Ryan. God is with him and each of us, no matter our stage of life, present in moments of wonder as children, in our relationships as family, faith community, friends, as we pause in gratitude, loving us even when we are too busy to notice. I pray though that we take time to notice, hearts open to the treasure that is God's love. Amen.