

# *St James United Church*

Message for August 6, 2023

Emancipation Sunday



“Freeing our Minds”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 13:54-58; “Spirit of Elijah” by Drew Jackson

As you guessed by the song we listened to during our “Learning Together” time, I’m a fan of Bob Marley. In addition to just liking reggae, I resonate with his message of love and equality among the races of the world. That philosophy is why I chose the cover of “One Love” by “Playing for Change”, a social action group bringing together musicians from around the globe, different cultures, ethnicities, various instruments, playing styles, showcasing that music can be a shared language which cuts across human divisions.

One of my favourite Bob Marley tunes is “Redemption Song”, especially the line “emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, no one but ourselves can free our mind.” It’s an apt sentiment as we mark Emancipation Sunday, honouring the day 189 years ago when the Act to abolish slavery came into effect across the British Empire, including in the colonies of British North America. That day ended in much of the world, though sadly not all until another 54 years had passed, the barbaric practice which saw over 12 million people from Africa kidnapped from their homelands and forced to labour in colonies in North America, South America and the Caribbean. At least 2 million people died in the voyage alone and countless others died from the harsh conditions of their enslavement. Theirs was also a spiritual death as they were forced to change their names, abandon their cultures, stop speaking their languages, and even to reject their ancestral faiths.

We often think that Canada was not part of this story. We like the feel good post-1834 story when this land became a final stop on the Underground Railroad. But according to Quebec historian Marcel Trudel there were approximately 4,200 enslaved people in Lower Canada between 1671 and 1831, with the United Empire Loyalists bringing an additional 3,000 to Upper Canada after the Revolutionary War. That doesn’t factor in numbers in either the Maritimes colonies or Newfoundland. Thankfully, we did become a place where thousands of formerly enslaved people and their descendants could come to live in freedom, but we were not some all-are-equal utopia. I know I don’t need to educate you on the history of segregation and anti-Black prejudice in Canada, nor of the ongoing experiences of racism for many racialized peoples in this country.

Hence the importance of Mr. Marley’s lyric about emancipating minds. It’s a phrase associated most with people freeing themselves from internalised oppression – internalised racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like, but in order to live into the all-are-equal vision of Jesus, a vision his neighbours just couldn’t wrap their heads around and so dismissed him out of hand, we need to

be freed of the falsehoods we have been fed about each other over the years, falsehoods which justified the narrative that Drew Jackson deconstructs where faith is used as cover to dispossess one people of their land and still others of their freedom and their lives in order to profit from it.

It's not an easy task I realize. In fact it can be quite a struggle. In this though I take comfort in our Torah reading because as we hear in the story about Jacob, at the end of his wrestling match with who turns out to be God, he is blessed, and his name is changed to Israel. The name means "one who sees God" but is understood by the Jewish community to refer to his struggle. Jacob prevails in the end, but the blessing doesn't come because of that. It comes through the struggle, spiritual growth coming through one's persistent willingness to wrestle with an issue.

In this we need to take into account the context of the story. Jacob didn't wrestle with God on an ordinary night. No, this is the night before he met his brother Esau. He was so worried that the meeting would go badly that he divided his household into two parties and sent them in differing directions. And he had good reason to be worried. Recall that he had cheated Esau and tricked their father so that he could get the larger portion of the inheritance instead of his brother. In this he placed his wants over those of his sibling, effectively ignoring that he even had one. Isn't that how chattel slavery operated and even now how racial prejudice still works?

But how can we deny our siblings' needs? We can't if we're going to put the wisdom of Jesus into practice, and yet we do anyway because long after bodies were freed, minds weren't, still held captive by the belief that some of us are superior, some of us inferior, simply because of how we look or where we come from. This created privilege, even if many of us who identify as white don't feel like it is the case, not when we struggle with the cost of living, difficulty finding work, living on a fixed income, various health concerns. Those are real issues and not to be taken lightly, but race adds a layer of struggle, as do gender, disability, sexuality, born into realities that because of the judgements of others mean some people have to work harder to experience what others take for granted.

We need, as Mr. Marley sings, to free our minds so that the progress of peoples of African descent, as well as other racialized identities is no longer stifled, so that no person of African descent or other racialized identity struggles to love themselves, so that no person lives with added mental health challenges or at a social or economic disadvantage just because of some implanted idea that worth is determined by the colour of somebody's skin. We need to free our minds, and when they are we all can be free, everyone given equal chance to be themselves and to share their gifts.

I know the ideas I have presented can be a struggle. I raise them not to make anyone feel guilty, but to raise awareness. It's a needed step if we are all going to be free. And as we seek to be so, we can be assured that the same strengthening hand of the almighty Bob Marley also sang of will be given to each of us, as it was to Jesus as he shared his all-are-equal vision, as it was to Jacob as he struggled through the night. That struggle is where his blessing came, and it will come to us as we struggle too, ultimately bringing a blessing of love and equality for the whole human race. Amen.