

St James United Church



Message for October 1, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Creation and World Communion

“A Healing Communion” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13; Daily Meditation of Henri Nouwen for July 5, 2020

Today is World Communion Sunday. First conceived of 93 years ago to promote Christian unity, this idea of Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, a Presbyterian minister from Pittsburgh, didn't gain much traction at first, not until the crisis of the Second World War made it clear we needed a spiritual foundation to help heal our world. As we know, we're in a crisis again, but I believe this time our prayer for a healing communion needs broadening beyond humans to all of creation.

As we've shared over these last weeks, our failure to do just that has got us into the ecological situation that we face, as we tend to focus on ourselves without much thought to wider impacts. Even attempts at climate mitigation are very human-centric as we seek technological solutions in the hope that we don't need to alter our lifestyles too much. We get a sense of this self focus in the Exodus 17 reading as the people came to an oasis and discovered it was dried up. Now they were right to be worried. Lack of water is pretty serious. But in their fear, they forgot they'd been in trouble before - at the sea, when water was bitter, when they needed food - and each time God, working through nature, provided for them. In this new situation God acted yet again.

Now self-focus, be it personal, national, even cross-human, is not unique to the Israelites. We all can lose sight of how our actions effect others, nature included, with harmful results. This is the gist of a similar story to what we just heard in Numbers, but unlike today's reading, Moses was punished for what he did. At first, he seemed to do the same as in Exodus 17, striking the rock to bring forth water. But he wasn't told to do that. He was told to speak to the rock. It feels like he fell into the trap Nouwen warns us of, how nature becomes opaque if we see it only as property to be manipulated to our end and not appreciated in its own right. As he says: “When we relate to a tree as nothing more than a potential chair, it cannot speak much to us about growth. When a river is only a dumping place for our...waste, it no longer informs us about movement.” It's a shame because nature is able to help if we're willing to listen, look and learn.

One way to cultivate this stance of listening and learning is to go for meditative walks. It doesn't matter where outside you go or for how long. What does matter is that you walk with openness to your surroundings, attentive to the sky, the ocean or a river, to the plants and animals you see and hear along the way, be it clump of grass, a tall tree, a crow, an ant, a cat, another human. The key is taking time to pause as you go to watch, listen, learn. Another

method is to sit outside with similar attentiveness, again ready to receive the wisdom being offered. If you can, walk the same route, or sit in the same spot, for a number of days, even weeks. Over time you'll notice changes happening around you, and within you, as you shift attentiveness onto the other than human.

I offer this suggestion not just because it's a good practice, though it is. I find it also echoes what we heard as Paul invited the Christians in Philippi to take on the mind of Christ. We usually hear just verses 5-11 and then just during Holy Week which shifts the emphasis onto Jesus. But Paul's concern was their self-focus, or should I say group focus, as they had splintered into factions. He wanted them to see their unity more than their separation, so he encouraged them to imitate Jesus, to embody how he didn't cling to status with God but let go of a sense of separation to be joined to every aspect of creation. As the hymn continues, he accepted death on the cross, but his self-emptying didn't end there. The opposite. He was lifted up with all of creation praising his name.

That we have known about climate change as long as we have but still seem unable to shift the needle suggests to me that we are missing the spiritual foundation that Paul wrote about as well, the way of the cross where we die to self-importance, the need to be in control and to prayerfully nurture our connection to others. The world we live in has become very isolating, each of us expected to fend for ourselves, perhaps our family. We end up quite guarded which is having a spiritual and emotional impact on us, even leaving us feeling quite helpless. The way of the cross invites us to trust - to trust God and others, including nature, as we prayerfully begin to see how connected we actually are to others, part of a large family. The meditative practice I suggested is one approach but any prayer activity that invites us to shift our focus from self to others is good. Equally acts of service can help us to see that connection.

We've never been alone in this. God stands on the rock, there with grace to help us to let go for others, to extend our relationships to embrace the world, nonhuman included. The Israelites may have been quarrelling and fearful, self-focused in the moment, but God acted with compassion and caring. God still does, including as we share in communion today. May we be open to that grace as God quenches our spiritual thirst and breaks down any barriers between us. May it connect us not just to each other but to our siblings around the world, especially those inordinately impacted by climate change, siblings in island nations who will be lost to the sea, or experiencing droughts or caught up in conflict because of ecological pressure. And may it nurture our connection beyond them to the wheat, the grapes, the soil, birds flying over the field, to all of life, all part of Christ who emptied himself to become part of creation.

Beloved, on this World Communion Sunday, I pray that Paul's invitation to the people of Philippi echoes in our hearts, that through Christ we may let go of ourselves and see our deep connections with each other, our global siblings, and beyond to the natural world just outside our door and all creation. As we nurture this spiritual foundation, God's grace will flow inside us, bringing new life, a flourishing to heal our hearts as surely as it will bring a healing communion to the world. Amen.