

# St James United Church



Message for October 22, 2023

Reformation Sunday

“Remembering Relationships” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22; Excerpt from *Institutes of Christian Life* by John Calvin

I have to tell you, whenever I turn on the news lately, I feel so discouraged. Top of the list is Israel-Gaza, and right behind that is the continuing incursion of Russia into Ukraine. Then there's homegrown issues like people denying the trauma of residential school survivors by claiming there's a “mass grave hoax” and to top it off the Saskatchewan government pushed through its “parental rights” law. News like this leaves me feeling that John Calvin, one of the most influential Protestant reformers, was right, we are depraved, there's something not right about us. How else do we do such awful things to each other?

Thankfully there are good news stories too. For example, Manitoba elected the first Indigenous premier of a province. Murray Sinclair called it Manitoba's act of reconciliation. Then Pope Francis made positive comments about the blessing of same-sex couples. And even more inspiringly the Bishop of Jerusalem was willing to volunteer as a hostage in exchange for the release of Israeli children. News like this fills me with hope and suggests that another reformer, Jacob Arminius was right, that there's something in us that helps us to say yes to God's universal and loving grace, a belief that influenced Methodist founder John Wesley.

Both of these Protestant theologies, competing as they may be, are present in our readings along with a third emphasized by Calvin again: his theology of predestination, a belief that some people are the elect, chosen by God as a sign of God's blessing in this life and for salvation in the next. Though not unique to Calvin, the belief was emphasized by him as a way to uphold God's supreme authority, God's sovereignty. We hear of this in Isaiah as God repeatedly says, “I am the Lord and there is no other”, and that God makes darkness and light, woe alongside well-being. Because God is sovereign, God chooses who to bless, so God chooses Cyrus of Persia, anointing him as the one to restore the people of Israel to their homeland. Likewise God chose the people of Israel as God's own, Jacob as God's servant.

There's something comforting about this theology. It places the onus of God's blessing on God. I don't need to do anything to warrant God's grace. God is the one who is reaching out in love. Yet as I say that there is also an Achilles' heel seen in history and the news. The idea that God chooses who to save, doing so long before any of us is born, may remove a pressure from us to prove ourselves as well as preserve God's power; but it also enhances the power of those who see themselves as the elect, privileged by God's choice. The teaching started out that we can't know if we are the elect but are to strive for holiness as if we are. But perhaps as another

sign that we're fallen, this idea became twisted, being blessed, not with a holy life but a prosperous one, became to some a sign of God's election. Max Weber wrote that this view, along with the "Protestant work ethic" helped strengthen capitalism with wealth not only viewed as a sign of God's blessing but some saying it's an affront to God to redistribute it.

You can see how this leads to some claiming that they're wholly right, their blessed status, be it economic, ethnic, religious, giving them rights over others. We see this at play in white supremacy. Denial of the experience of Indigenous peoples is part of that. We see it in the fight over pronoun choice. Proponents of parental rights can't see they are denying the rights of trans children, and their parents. We see it in Russian claims that there is no Ukrainian ethnicity and so they have a right to annex their nation.

And we definitely see it at play in Israel and Gaza. The grief-fuelled thirst for revenge after Hamas' murdered 1400 Israelis is understandable. What Hamas did is unconscionable. But the backdrop to the war is a narrative among some Israelis of being chosen by God, that all the land was promised to them, an idea bolstered by the far right elements of the Israeli government as they promoted settlement expansion, tacitly encouraged violence against Palestinians, even proposed annexing the West Bank. And they are just the end point of a fifty plus year occupation. But that said, the rhetoric of being chosen is not Israeli-only. There is an Arab part to this protracted conflict. The hope for an Israel at peace with its neighbours was dashed in 1967 when they were provoked into a war with Egypt, Jordan and Syria, a war which led to the occupation. Israel was attacked again in 1973, further terrorized by bombings and hijackings, and then Hamas came on the scene, eventually taking over Gaza, vowing to destroy Israel, a promise bolstered, I've read, by the Islamist belief that once a land has been under Muslim rule, it's always to be. That understandably stokes post-Holocaust fear.

And yet according to Islam there are no favoured people, not even Arab. I hear this echoed in Isaiah, Cyrus chosen by God though he didn't know God, not of God's chosen people. He didn't need to be because God's blessing isn't limited. God's love is for everyone, a universal grace we all can respond to. Even Calvin believed there is a remnant of God's original blessing that God works with to bring us to holiness over time. This too is part of God's accepting love. God's grace may begin with God, but we're not forced. This is where Jesus' response comes in. We can discern what is Caesar's and what is God's, a responsibility that gets us into trouble as we keep thinking and acting like only some are chosen by God, preferably us. Thankfully, in the end everyone and everything belongs to God, is held in God's love. And with God's grace we will come to understand this, in fact I believe more and more of us do, and as we do, we'll extend compassion to everyone, affirm everyone, be at peace with everyone.

We live in a time which can be overwhelming. But despite that I have hope. Amid suggestions in our readings about election, depravity, grace, there's an overarching truth. God is sovereign. If there's only us in charge, we're in trouble, but we're not even that. God is, holding everything in love, bringing forth the peace and justice that is to be over time, for the well-being of us all. I trust in that. Amen.