

St James United Church



Message for October 29, 2023

All Saints Sunday

“Called to Be Saints” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46; “The Open Door” by Danna Faulds

As many of you can attest, on Friday our men's group held its fish dinner. It was great as always with plenty of fish, brewis, scrunchions, and plenty of conversation with families and friends. It's a fundraiser but really so much more. Hearts are filled along with bellies as strangers become friends and friends become family. As I looked out from the potatoes I was serving, I saw a reflection of what we're celebrating today, a gathering of the saints from St. James and beyond, folks joining in from Cochrane, Wesley, Gower and more, everyone sharing in community.

Note that I just used “saints” in the present tense. We think of saints as those who have died, both people historically lifted up as models of faith and so known to us as St. James or St. Clare, and loved ones across generations, known perhaps as Nan or Uncle Joe but who we trust are equally welcomed into God's eternal peace because of how they lived. But we can only really speak of them as saints, recognized for holiness, as part of a larger call for all of us to be saints.

I experience this double meaning in “The Open Door” by Danna Faulds which we heard a moment ago. I chose the poem initially because the language of a door opening and her stepping through sounds like what I want the moment of my death to feel like, “the gravitational pull of Spirit” too strong to ignore and “I am received by something far too vast to see” calling me to just “Be”. And while it may be what I want at the end of my life, it's also what grounds me in this one, the presence of a door which can open for each of us in this life, letting us glimpse how we are loved “without adverbs, descriptors, or qualities.” This awareness empowers us to share our lives in love, to lift others up because we've been uplifted, to encourage others to bloom because we've been graced to do so.

That connection is what I hear Jesus saying in his response to the Pharisees. He spoke from the tradition of rabbis like Hillel, a famous sage of the generation before him who according to a Talmudic story was challenged by a possible convert to teach him the Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel accepted the challenge then said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.” We hear Jesus echo this, both he and Hillel understanding the deep truth that loving God is meaningless unless expressed concretely in how we treat others, be they next door or on the other side of the world.

But not everyone gets this. A contemporary of Hillel by the name of Shammai was approached by the same gentile but he sent him away, finding the request insulting. He couldn't see a way to make Torah simple, caught up as he was in all the details of Mosaic

Law. Some of the Pharisees testing Jesus were surely the same. I wonder if Moses was like that too, caught up in all that he'd experienced and unable to let it go, which is why in the end he couldn't enter the Promised Land.

It feels like we too get caught up in ourselves in this time period. As you know, I'm working on a Doctor of Ministry. As part of that I've been reading a very, very long book called *A Secular Age* by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. He speaks about how we've shifted culturally over the last 500 years, including how we've become caught up in our interior life as individuals and so less inclined to understand ourselves communally, defined as part of a wider whole. Among other things this has contributed to church decline, accelerated in our time with people suspicious of big institutions. It's impacted how we form society as we mostly judge things based on what's in it for me, disconnecting love of God, increasingly love of ourselves, from love of our neighbour.

I'm sure you see the same pattern. Which is why days like this are so important, reminding us as we honour those who have gone before us that our truest identity is found not in ourselves alone but in our relationships. This is something Taylor pointed to as he wrote of an earlier age, harsher for sure than now, but one where people saw themselves as extensions of each other. I like our appreciation of personal rights and freedoms, that's a step forward. But given how much it feels like we're less inclined to look out for one another, I wish we'd regain some of that earlier sense.

It makes me wonder if we need a collective spiritual awakening like Danna, or more to the point we need what Moses experienced at the end of his life. As you heard in Deuteronomy, God took him to a mountain top to see the whole land, not details but a broad landscape, distinct places but connected. This was Moses' dying moment and we're told he was buried by God, but perhaps he was buried in God. After all, spiritual growth happens as we die to self-focus and discover that we are part of a whole. Fr. Richard Rohr writes that love for another person helps us do just that, shifting us from self to focus on another. I believe this is why a key part of Christian life is being part of a community, where we do things together and so make space for love to grow between us, and from us into the wider community. Fish dinners are part of this, as are UCW Teas, Trunk and Treats, cooking meals for folks experiencing housing insecurity, even committee meetings, all moments where we experience God not so much above us as between us. And graciously we experience the same in communion, a glimpse of who we really are, joined in God's love.

As we share this sacrament, all those we have loved and loved us, are present, all the saints above, with us the saints below. They are present because love binds us in God. We may live in a world where we all seem caught up in ourselves but it isn't the full picture. We still have places like this that help us to refocus on others, to nurture belonging, to embody how love for God is expressed in love for neighbour as we reach out in service. It's a simple vision but one that helps us grow in God and so to grow as a community of saints, past and present, joined in love. Amen.