

St James United Church

Message for January 14, 2024
Second Sunday after Epiphany



“It’s All About Relationships”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:40-51; “The Call” by Charlotte Mew

The Christmas decorations are packed away again. We have marked Jesus’ birth, remembered not just shepherds, but magi who followed a star and his affirmation as God’s beloved upon his baptism. Each is part of Christmas, but as Howard Thurman once wrote: “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart.” This is the work that Jesus was born to do. It is also work that he shares with others. It makes sense that Jesus would share this work. Each element that Thurman named, based on what Jesus says of himself in Luke 4, is about relationship. Finding the lost is about someone coming home. Releasing the prisoner is about them being reintegrated into the community. Bringing peace is about healing broken ties. And how can you feed the hungry in the truest sense without sharing a meal and so becoming family? The work of Christmas, Jesus’ work, is about sharing relationship.

John understood this, offering a different take on Jesus calling his disciples than in Matthew, Luke or Mark. As we’ll hear next week, in those versions, Jesus walks up, speaks with some fishers or a tax collector, and they leave behind what they were doing. It underlines the impact he had on people. But I like John’s version. It is interactive. First the Baptist points out Jesus to two of his disciples. They follow after him and Jesus invites them to spend time with him. Then one of them, Andrew, tells his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus who then nicknames him Peter (the rock). Later Jesus goes to where Andrew and Peter are from, but not before first finding Philip and inviting him to follow him, then Philip tells Nathanael who meets with Jesus.

What do we see in this? Friends and siblings meet with Jesus; he spends time with them; they tell other friends and siblings, who in turn spend time with him; then others meet with him too; and more and more people form a relationship with him, a point strengthened by all of the different names that come up in the passage. It’s about relationships. They’re also the heart of the first sign Jesus performs as he turns water into wine. He does this at a wedding (you can’t get much more relational than that) and does it at the behest of his mother (another important relationship). Repeatedly in John’s gospel, Jesus talks with, connects to, relates with others. His teachings are heart centred, so make sense only after he’s made a bond with his listeners, be it Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, even the Pharisees. And as he prepares for his arrest,

he prays for his disciples to maintain a relationship with each other, sharing a unity that's an extension of what he experiences with God the Father.

Relationships are also the key to understanding Paul's concern about the Corinthians. At first read the issue is sexual. A group in Corinth were convinced that because they were "saved" in spirit they could do whatever they wanted bodily. That's what the reference to food is about, them arguing it was like eating if they were hungry. But Paul reminds them that sex is more than that because it establishes not just a physical but a spiritual bond. To think otherwise was to disregard the other person's worth and forget how actions have consequences. Why? Because we are in a relationship, connected, bound to one another in Christ. We have freedom, but it is in Christ, which means we're free to do as we wish if it honours another's worth, is grounded in love. They forgot that disregard for others ripples out and impacts the whole community as surely as when we show care for others.

Paul was underlining what we experience as we come together in faith. What is it that keeps you coming to worship? As much as I hope it is a moving sermon, or uplifting music, or a meaningful experience of communion, I know it's the relationships you form, friendships you nurture. That is why the death of Harvey or anyone else hurts. We're knit together in love. And because of that we'll reach out to support Gail, just as we'll visit someone in hospital or give someone a call. And I bet for more than a few of you it was a relationship that brought you here in the first place, someone told you about St. James, perhaps came with you and introduced you to others. Did you know that's the most effective way to grow a congregation? It's what we heard Andrew did with Peter, and Philip with Nathanael. I encourage you then to think of someone you know and invite them to church. I realize we may be uncomfortable doing so, worried we're pushing our faith on them. But why not share something that's brought meaning to your life? You tell friends about a great restaurant or gym, so why not a community where you feel supported, and they can too.

We nurture these relationships most profoundly in sharing communion. In this we acknowledge that what we share is more than human, it comes through the Spirit. That same Spirit binds us in love not just for ourselves, but empowered in grace, sends us to live it out in the community. And not just with platitudes but in concrete ways so everyone knows their worth as we put on a meal, work for peace, support the food bank, advocate for affordable housing, tackle climate change, seek reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, help refugees get settled, partner with organisations who also do charitable work, all about strengthening the relationships we live in the world, doing the work of Christmas in our own community context.

When we do these, we honour Jesus whose birth we celebrate, whom God called beloved. We affirm too that God calls us beloved, that we're friends in faith. May we keep nurturing what that means to us and extend it into our community. Christmas may be over, but the work of Christmas is just begun. Amen.