

St James United Church



Message for January 28, 2024 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

“Devotion Over Dogma” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28; Excerpt from Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*.

I've been listening to a podcast called “Data Over Dogma”. By bible scholar Dan McClellan and his friend Dan Beecher, it is billed as “a deep interrogation of the bible where they look at what the bible actually says and what it decidedly doesn't say (even if everyone thinks it does)”. It's worth a listen, especially because, as the name suggests, they try to look at the text as first written and not through preconceived notions based on one doctrine or another.

I hear something similar going on in our readings today, though it isn't data so much as love, or should I say devotion, over dogma. I use the word devotion intentionally. In our time we equate love with a feeling, but devotion is love in action. If I say a parent is devoted to their child, you start thinking of everything they do to care for their little one. Similarly, a child devoted to their grandparents is pictured running to them for a hug, or someone devoted to God imagined as reading a bible, praying, perhaps helping out with what the church does to help others. We picture that last point because we know that love of God is expressed in love of neighbour.

That is what jumped out as I reflected on today's portion from Mark. Jesus goes to the synagogue where he teaches, but then someone there has an unclean spirit, and he heals them. His devotion to God is lived out in helping the person. This amazes people and they tie together how he taught with authority and freed the person from their torment. I wonder if that's the root of his authority, even the core of his teaching. Why else does Mark use only two sentences to write that Jesus was teaching, saying nothing of what he taught, then takes seven to tell us about Jesus and the person with an unclean spirit? It reads to me that the healing is the content of his teaching, that his desire to help the person without hesitation or judgment, only with compassion, is the primary message.

Yet as followers of Jesus, there are many times we reverse the devotion-dogma pairing, make right belief the main point. It's curious because our doctrine is not what initially draws people to a faith community. They're drawn to the love they feel when they come. People make up their mind if they're going to come back to a church in five minutes, long before the first hymn or prayer, way before the sermon, based on how they are treated, on the feeling they get of the community, a sense that like Jesus whose teaching was rooted in his relationship with God, a relationship that called him to help others, our prayer likewise informs how we treat others. It was the love and care that early Christians showed those in need, even helping people during plague at risk to their lives, that drew people to join them, and the same is true today. That is what I find so inspiring about Fr. Greg's work with Homeboy Industries. His love enabled him to

look past any bias toward former gang members and he stood with them, creating jobs for them and in the process releasing them from the torment of their past.

He understood that love needs to be our focus more than a particular belief, which is Paul's point with the Christians in Corinth. There was a group that "knew" their theology and were convinced that because there was only one God, it didn't matter if they ate meat from a temple sacrifice. By their reasoning, if the god of the temple was false, the meat was just meat. Paul agreed with them but disagreed with how they let their conviction obscure that they were hurting some siblings in faith who believed that God may be the supreme god but is not the only god. For them eating meat from the temple was a form of worship. Devotion to those siblings should have meant that those who "knew better" didn't do something that looked like devotion to another god. In the end their actions spoke louder than their words, and their actions didn't reflect love for their siblings.

I'm sure you have had experiences like that too, where someone's firm conviction in what they believe about Jesus seems more important than emulating the love of Jesus. That was my experience. When I was in Alberta, I served a church in St. Albert, a community where the ministerial association (that's an organization where churches work together) had split over doctrine. A predecessor had preached a controversial sermon at a joint Easter event, offering a message that would have been OK at the United Church but caused a ruckus in the group present. When she refused to sign a faith statement to stay in the ministerial, her teammate also refused as did other clergy. When I arrived the rift was ten years old. There was hope it would be healed until news broke of my sexuality. All seemed lost but then Dean, an Alliance Church pastor, decided that working together for needs of the community was more important than doctrinal concerns and came to see me to suggest we rebuild the ministerial anyway. For the most part it worked, although a letter was sent to the mayor expressing concern that I had led a prayer at the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. God love him, Dean tried very hard to shield me from that. And we hit another rough patch when all but the Presbyterian minister refused to be vice chair when it was my turn to take the helm. I sometimes wonder if I should have stepped down out of love for my colleagues rather than expect them to do the loving. It's hard to say. Dean insisted that I lead despite the others' concern and over time they softened towards me. I don't know if they were freed of their bias, but I will say that Dean helped free me of any doubts I had in my call as a gay minister, and reassured me that our church is on the right side of history in its commitment to inclusion. That congregation went on to do some really good work in supporting LGBTQ+ youth, folks who are housing insecure, people with addictions and striving to heal relations with the Indigenous peoples as well.

That experience gave me hope of what is possible not only in churches but between them if we follow Jesus' example as he made devotion to others his prime message. Though not always agreeing how best to do so, the Christians of St. Albert took his message to heart and worked together for a community where kinship of everyone was key. I believe that is a path to walk wherever we may live. Dogma is important but when we look to Jesus, devotion to others seems more so. May it be for us too. Amen.