

# St James United Church



## Message for February 25, 2024 Second Sunday in Lent

“It's All About Relationships” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-7; John 8:21-30; Excerpt from Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastorix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner Saint*

As I shared last week online, Lent is a time to ponder our relationships, to reflect on how we are with each other - with God, loved ones, strangers, other creatures, the earth. We reflected on each of these in broad ways, but today I want us to go deeper and consider our most fundamental relationship, the one we have in and with God.

I say in and with intentionally because that divine relationship is different from others. In the relationships we share with an animal, even other people, there is an objective quality, a separateness even as we connect with each other. I am me and you are you. We know one another, care for one another, but there is still an otherness. And this otherness increases as in relationships with less and less familiarity. Now as I say other, I don't mean in a negative as we sometimes speak about prejudice and how someone's viewed as “other” based on differences. Just that there is separation. That continues in closer relationships too, though they do have a sense of “in” to them, like what I share with Glen, you share with your loved ones, an intimacy in which I know myself more deeply, part of my identity connected to our relationship share.

But with the divine, with God, it goes deeper than that, because we each come from God, God found not just beyond us but within us. As much as we're separate from God, we're part of God too, like a wave is part of the ocean, to hint at a teaching quoted in the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. The trouble is we do one of two things, we think we're completely separate from God, a single wave, and in the grief of that separation try and fill the void by looking for God in other things, like what I quoted from Augustine last week: “Late have I loved you,... And see, you were within, and I was outside myself and sought you there...” Or we take it a step further and mistake ourselves for the ocean, believe we are God and not only look for God in other things but use them for what they can give us, like what I shared in our learning together as a pipeline was built under Lake Oahe in North Dakota, without thought of the impact on the water, or the people who lived there, or the wider world, only thinking of the money to be made in transporting the oil. This forgetfulness of who we really are is what I hear as Jesus speaks of himself as coming from above and the people as being from below.

He says to them that they will die in their *hamartia*, often translated as sin, but in our gospel I chose to render it as error. Alternatively it could have been flaw or frailty but really means to miss the mark like when you are shooting an arrow and it goes off from what you intended.

Jesus was speaking to that tendency in us to make decisions based not on who we are in and with God but based on the delusions we have about ourselves, either to be overly confident in our own power, or to doubt it and so to make decisions rooted in fear. We get a hint of this in Genesis as God promises Abraham and Sarah that they'll be parents of a great nation. At the end Abraham laughs. It's funny to think this elderly couple could be parents but God promises this will be the case. Abraham is held up as a model of faith, and understandably as he left his home country because God called him to, but he also repeatedly reacts in fear. Consider how he has his first child, not Isaac, the father of Israel, but Ishmael. He has him with Hagar, Sarah's slave, both she and Abraham doubting God's promise that Sarah will have a child. Then when Isaac is born, he casts Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp, doing so at Sarah's request. These are fear responses. All of us are prone to them, despite God making a promise to be our God and for us to be God's people. We want to be in control of a life where we actually have very little. Perhaps we need to ask God to add more uncertainty into each day, and so inviting us to trust even more and not less.

I don't say that with judgement. I don't think Jesus was judging his listeners either, but naming a truth, that we'll keep reacting with fear, as we see so much in the world today, as long as we try to be in control and also keep looking for validation in the world around us. We need to turn to our source, turn to the ocean of which we are a wave. When we turn to the one in whom we are a wave, we discover, as Morrie reflects, that we don't need to fear our eventual end because like a wave crashing onto the shore, the water that made that wave is drawn back into the ocean. It is about letting go and trusting that we are part of something larger, and that is liberating even as it places our lives into context. That is why Jesus says we'll die in our *hamartia* until we accept this as he did. It's what Nadia Bolz-Weber is getting at, that "every single time [we] die to something – [our] notions of [our] own specialness, [our] plans and desires for something to be a... particular way – ...[we] discover more life and more freedom than if [we] had gotten what [we] wanted."

We come to this through grace, but most often not in a once and done moment but really in a life of prayer, of meditation, of daily letting go. That is why prayer is such a big part of Lent, such a big part of these days that lead us to Jesus' great letting go, a death that opened into the fullness of life in God. I encourage you to take time in prayer, be it sitting in quiet mindfulness, reading your bible, walking in nature, listening to music, whatever it is that helps you turn to God and in this to discover who you really are in them. As we nurture this relationship, it has an impact on the others in our lives, as we come to appreciate that we aren't the only wave but one of many in the divine ocean, all given form, including in the past and into the future. There is a liberating unity we find there, inviting us to respond to each other with greater compassion and love.

Let us pause in these days to nurture this most fundamental relationship. Jesus came to show us the way into God, not a way of fear or overconfidence but trust, letting go in love. As we do, we will find that we're much more than we thought, all of us part of the ocean of being that is God. Amen.