



Cochrane Street United Church

(in Partnership with St. James United Church)



Message for March 3, 2024; Third Sunday in Lent

“Loving God/Loving Neighbour” – Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft at Cochrane Street United Church

Have you noticed how relationally focused the readings are this Lent? Now I may be projecting, conscious as I’ve been of the partnership that Cochrane Street and St. James have been working on. A bit of projection seems appropriate. But I don’t think that’s all it is. Lent this year is being shaped by how the Hebrew Scripture selections have been focused on a series of covenants, first between God and Noah and all of creation, then between God and Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, and today between God and the people of Israel as Moses is given the Torah, God’s teaching, at Mount Sinai. Now we don’t always live up to our covenants as you will hear next week, but just the same, these relational promises called covenants are front and centre this year, placed there for us to reflect on who we are with one another, on how we treat each other.

I appreciate what a gift this is this year, especially as we turn on the news and see a world where there seems to be less and less concern for others, as we divide into warring factions, not just on the other side of the world in actual wars, but closer to home in social and political and economic divisions, many people preferring to listen only to people they agree with, and so are confirmed in their viewpoints. But God calls us to another way, to cross “boundaries” instead and seek to understand another person’s view and honour them as a child of God, even if we don’t agree with them. We are called to create spaces for peaceful collaboration and mutual, caring support, places of belonging and love, something you understand more than many, first in your relationship with First Light, then in your discernment to partner with other congregations. Thank you for your courage in that, not just from St. James but the wider church, as you named what we all need to embrace, not in terms of surviving, but modelling the kind of relationships needed in our world.

We need this because we know the prevalence of the opposite, people seeking to control others, to use others, rather than collaborate with and support them. And we see this in religious circles. Take how some people treat the ten commandments. We tend to translate the word Torah as law in English and so some approach them quite legalistically, without the nuance that we get when we use the word teaching or instruction which is closer to the Hebrew meaning. Even calling them the ten commandments rather than the ten words betrays how they have been used in our history to shame others rather than as a guide. And this misses an important teaching about them. Did you know that in Exodus 32 the tablets were said to be written not just on one side but both? This is given an interesting interpretation in the Jewish

mystical tradition of Kabbalah where it is taught that God wrote these ten words, front and back, at the same time, so they're in parallel, the first in Jewish counting, "I am the Lord your God" lining up with the sixth, "You shall not kill", or "You shall not worship idols" with "You shall not commit adultery." They're to be understood in tandem. I watched a video of a rabbi explaining this. He shared how at its root the first word is about honouring who God is, not for what God can do for us but in God's own right, and how we are to treat each other likewise, to love another in their own right, not for what they bring us. It brings such depth of meaning to loving God and loving neighbour, the two truly bound together.

We hear this joining of respect for both God and others in today's gospel too as Jesus overturns tables and drives the animals out of the Temple. He wasn't angry at the selling. That had been a part of Temple life for generations, but at how that selling on behalf of God was being abused. His anger was directed at the tables, the coins, the animals, especially doves, being sold, signs of unjust commerce. The Temple was to embody the shared relationship between God and the people, but the people were not part of that equation anymore, the Temple being used in a way that harmed others. For example, with the Temple tax and money exchanges, the Temple became a bank of sorts. Poor farmers would come for a loan but given the oppressive economy they'd end up losing their land. So much for being a sign of God's care for them. This is why his anger was directed at doves. They were all that the poor, like his parents, could afford as a sacrifice. They became a symbol of a disconnect between God's teaching and how people were treated.

How we love God and treat our neighbour are supposed to go together. Which is where I hear the power of Jesus' words about the Temple of his body. It is a reminder of how we are to be as church, embodying with one another that same union of love of God and neighbour, the central focus of Jesus's ministry. It is to be our focus too and Lent is given to us as a time to deeply ponder that. One way we can do this is to consider what we are about to do as we celebrate communion. We often think of this sacrament in connection to Jesus' last meal with his disciples but here at this table we recall every meal that he shared, including the many meals he ate with tax collectors and "sinners". It was a visible sign of his love and respect for them as children of God, and of God's love and respect for them too. And that's what we honour at table, relearning the love and respect at the heart of those meals, and the sense of belonging they created. Our world needs that. Without it we get what we see on the news. But here, as we too feel loved, respected, cared for, a sense of belonging, we're empowered to go into the world to extend that love and care that we all need.

There's a decidedly relationship focus in our bible readings this Lent, and for that I'm thankful. We live in a world that seems to be pulling us away from each other, but here in word and at table we are reminded that we belong with one another, that we are called to care for and respect one another, just as in our relationship with God. That's the heart of God's covenant with us. So, let's share that, let's live that in our world. Amen.