

# St James United Church



Message for March 10, 2024  
Fourth Sunday in Lent

“From Judgement to Understanding” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21; Excerpt from John Wellwood, *The Journey of the Heart*

As you will recall from last week, our readings focused on the relationships we share with each other as an extension of how we're in a relationship with God. The ten commandments, or ten words, point to this, especially if you follow the Kabbalistic tradition that God wrote the words that speak to the divine relationship on one side of the tablet in tandem with those about human relationships on the other. Loving God and loving neighbour are two parts of one commitment. Which is why Jesus overturned the tables and drove out the animals. The Temple wasn't functioning as a sign of God's care for the people.

It's a shame how that happened, yet I'm not surprised, not when I ponder how humans often treat one another. I come face to face with that when I consider my initial reaction to our Torah reading. Despite John 3 saying God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn it, I did just that as I pondered Numbers 21. I got stuck on the people's complaint that God led them to the wilderness to die, how there was no food or water, but then how the food was miserable. “If the food was miserable, how was there no food?” I thought, “Talk about ungrateful! No wonder God lost it and sent poisonous snakes after feeding them with manna day after day.”

I turned it into a judgement story but if that were the case why did God tell Moses to fashion a bronze serpent so people could be healed? God was with them in their trouble not angrily punishing them. I needed to put myself in their shoes and if I'm honest I'd complain more than they did. But that wasn't my reaction. I saw myself as better than them rather than try to understand them. That's how sin works. We consider ourselves separate from, better even, than others, seeing only from our vantage point. Which is what happens for the Israelites. They have to go around Edom, adding distance to their journey, so they're frustrated, complain. And then when snakes come, they interpret it as punishment. Do you see how self-focused that is? That happens in relationships as we look at others not for who they are but from who we are.

And though God didn't send the son to the world to condemn it, Jesus gets condemned, judged for what he does, and says, and who he hangs with. It's a big part of why he is crucified, lifted up as Jesus says to Nicodemus, like the serpent. Those who judged him did the same to the so-called sinners he ate with. We turn people into sinners by our judgement, proscribing one thing or other based on our experience not theirs. A straight minister ends up rejecting the experiences of a gay congregant because he doesn't understand the other

person's heart. A cisgender politician bans the help a trans person needs because she can't imagine what those needs would be. They project their discomfort onto the other. We turn people into "sinners" but they aren't really. It's about us not them. We do this in terms of gender, culture, race, belief, ability. And in the process fail to see their souls.

But that isn't what Jesus did. He saw people's souls, affirmed them as made in God's image and likeness, equal before God. He understood, as shared in the Learning Together time last week, that God breathed in them, instilling in them the spark of divine life. Jesus wanted that flame to grow in them. And it did, but not by making them into something they weren't. He helped them grow as they were, grace building on nature as they say. Now this doesn't mean sinful attitudes and actions don't matter. In his love, Jesus wanted, and still wants, people to let go of what was hurtful to them and those around them. To use a personal example, Jesus doesn't ask me to not be gay but to be faithful in my relationship with Glen. His starting point is acceptance and understanding not judgement.

And this is where healing happens, occurring in two ways like when people look at the bronze serpent. First, we come to terms with all that we are, which John Wellwood reminds us includes accepting our pain and darkness along with our power and light. In this I hear him speak of our shadow, the parts that we deem, or as likely others deem, as unacceptable, like a so-called deadly sin like anger or jealousy, or a virtue that isn't appreciated like independence if you are female or emotional sensitivity if you were raised as a boy. We push these things into our unconscious and suppressed as they are they influence what we do, and continue to until we bring them into our awareness. But when we do, bringing all the realities of our lives together in grace, it is like the cross joining earth and heaven. We begin to see the root of our anger and learn to direct it, or we come to see our sensitivity as a gift. What we were told was bad turns out to be our superpower.

Second, according to rabbinical teaching, the Israelites weren't healed by looking at the bronze serpent but past it toward God. In other words, healing happens as we shift from looking only at ourselves and think about others. Like I said, a big part of "sin" is how we feel separate from others and God and do things out of that. But as we come to accept ourselves more fully, we can be more compassionate toward others, are more comfortable trying to put ourselves in their shoes. We then can follow the meaning of "God so loved the world that God sent his only Son so that all who believe in him may have eternal life." Belief isn't about making an assent of the mind but joining our heart and so loving Jesus. In our love for him we emulate him, extending to others the acceptance and understanding that were hallmarks of his ministry.

In the end, it is all about our relationships, our love for God lived out in love for others and for ourselves, each grounded in acceptance and understanding. These we know aren't automatic, judgement coming too easily. But they do come through introspection and prayer. Thankfully, both are a part of Lent. As we do both in the holy days, may we grow in the grace that Jesus offers, loving and accepting ourselves and in turn loving and accepting others. Amen.