

St James United Church

Message for March 17, 2024
Fifth Sunday in Lent



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

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33; Excerpt from *Roots of Buddhist Psychology* by Jack Kornfield

Over these weeks of Lent, we've been considering our relationships – relationships with God, with each other, with creation, and how all of these relationships are impacted by the one we have with ourselves. We began Lent by looking at how they are all connected and then slowly pulled them apart. But now as we near the end of this season with just a week before Palm Sunday, we're back at the beginning to ponder them together again.

I say back at the beginning, but Jeremiah's prophetic book is a far cry from the reflections on Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. There's a large chronological gap between them, and a theological gap too. In Genesis, God is viewed as standing apart but jump some 1500 years and God draws close, shifting even from a spousal relationship imaged in Exodus to a covenant of the heart. No one needs to be taught about God, because God is with them, joined in a relationship that is accessible, not tied to living in Canaan but with them wherever they are. It echoes Jesus saying of his followers: “where I am, there will my servant be... and whoever serves me, the Father honours.” There's intimacy here, Jesus wanting to share the loving community he has with the Father. Jesus and Jeremiah point to unity, a closeness we only get in a fleeting way with each other, even a spouse. It's why we search for fulfillment in so much of our lives, look for a connection that in the end only God can bring. Augustine, who I referred to as we began Lent puts it this way, “O God my heart is restless until it rests in you.”

We're restless as a species and seem more so in our time than ever before. We've withdrawn from God and disconnected from each other. But Jesus offers us a way forward from this, saying: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.” That's a lot of wisdom in one sentence. We can be like grain with its hard shell. We live in a pressure cooker of a society, suffering because of it. People are pulling away from God and isolating from others, when what we need is to draw close and open up. Jesus' words invite us to accept that life includes a good deal of dying. God doesn't prevent it but is with us in it, including through others' caring.

Some of this dying is simply dying to ourselves, letting go of self focus, agendas, our comfort for others. This applies to us as individuals but also as communities, Jesus' overall message focused not on just a personal relationship with him but who we are with each other as part of God's Reign. It points to our reflection last week, how we need to let go not just of worries but the judgements and fears that hold us back in our relationships. Here Jesus' words about dying meet Jeremiah's covenant of the heart. If God is present within us, each other, our communities, world, then relationship with God is relationship with each other. This grows as we are present to one another, listen to each other, especially when we don't understand another. This is the posture people took in our PIE Day event cohosted with Gower about gender inclusive schools and is good to be conscious of as we gather for our ACM. We don't always agree with each other. When that happens, we don't judge another out of hand but are invited to hear them with curiosity, to wonder why they think whatever it is. This open posture is useful in the wider community as we get caught up in interest groups, different visions for the world, divided from rather than connected to each other.

And we can apply this to the wider world of creation. As I shared in the Learning Together time, we approach the natural world, plants, animals, as if they have less worth than humans do. But in Ojibway teaching we are taught to approach nature more humbly, with an ear to listen to lessons that other animals and the plants want to teach us. To receive them we need to let go of the belief that we are smarter and to honour different kinds of intelligence. We can take time to listen to our siblings in nature in the same way we listen to God in prayer. We come to stillness, releasing our own constant stream of thoughts and assumptions and beliefs and just observe. And along with the lessons they wish to give us, we discover too that every creature has its place, has a right to that place, and how humans harm that in the way we live. To honour that we again need to let go, let go of a carbon intensive lifestyle that is harming the earth, and harming other humans as well.

Jack Kornfield reminds us that "we all have, without exception, a very deep longing to give - to give to others, to give to the society, to work, to love, to care for this earth." We can give when we are also willing to receive, to receive each other with openness to the God who is writing their teaching on our hearts, not far away but close, present in circles of ever-widening relationships, personally, communally, cross-culturally, inter-religiously, across species, in all of creation. May we be attentive to God in all of these and so simply attentive to each other in all of these. When we are, we'll find the abundant life, the fulfillment, the connection that we've always wanted. May it be so. Amen