

St James United Church



Message for April 28, 2024 Fifth Sunday of Easter

“So All Can Flourish” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Acts 10:25-34; John 15:9-17; an excerpt from *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen

As I've shared through the Easter season, the resurrection of Jesus wasn't just about him, but is for us, for all people, a sharing of his reconciling work so that everyone can flourish. This is poetically expressed in today's gospel and last Sunday's, each about abiding in Christ, as branches grafted to the vine, imitating his love in our lives. Beautiful. Inspiring. But what does it mean? And how do we do it?

Thankfully we have the Book of Acts to show us, especially Acts 8 from last week and 10 from today. These chapters are two parts of a pivotal moment in the life of the church as the disciples extended Jesus' ministry beyond Judea and their fellow Jews. The shift was small at first as Philip was led by the Spirit to preach among the Samaritans, a mission Peter aligned himself to. Then as we heard last week, Philip went further, sharing the gospel with an Ethiopian. He was likely a Gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism but couldn't because he was a eunuch. That wasn't a barrier to Philip though and he baptised him. And like in Philip's work with Samaritans, in Acts 10 Peter continued this work and baptized another Gentile who was sympathetic to Judaism, Cornelius and his family.

It's a significant moment. So much so that Peter is often credited with baptizing the first Gentile rather than Philip. But something else is going on, requiring a vision from God to make sure it happened. You see before this morning's reading, Peter was on the roof of Simon the Tanner's home. As he prayed, he saw a sheet descending from the sky on which were animals that are considered both kosher and non kosher. A voice told him to eat but he protested saying he'd only ever eaten food that was clean. The voice told him not to name as profane anything that God had made. This is what enabled him to preach in our reading that God doesn't show partiality to anyone, but accepts everyone who follows God's way. The question that Peter must have asked of himself though is whether Cornelius fit those words. Unlike the Ethiopian who came from outside of the Roman Empire, Cornelius was from inside of it, represented it as a centurion, in effect making him an enemy, at least not to be trusted.

But that's the point of reconciliation, the reason why Jesus breathed on his disciples to gift them with the Spirit and told them that whatever sins they forgive are forgiven. Baptizing Cornelius was taking this to heart, taking to heart Jesus' invitation in our gospel to love others as he loved them. He said that no one has greater love than to lay down their life for a friend. This brings us to the

cross where Jesus showed a love even greater than that, praying of his enemies, “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” Talk about living what he taught.

That speaks to me of who we are to be as a faith community, modelling a welcome that stretches us beyond our comfort, not just so people that we agree with or live in the same neighbourhood, or have similar life experiences as us can be included as part of our community, but people who grew up in different circumstances, ascribe to a different politics or faith, or come to church with different expectations than some of us are accustomed to. We live in a world where differences become barriers and we see “others” as enemies. But Jesus came so that we all could have life. And we truly flourish when all means all, when everyone is included without judgement.

I dare say we expressed a bit of that last weekend. There were moments when it was challenging to focus during the service as some adults raised voices and kids ran around. Your patience and compassion in that was a more powerful sermon than what I was trying to say about Philip and the Ethiopian, embodied what Peter said in today’s reading about God not showing partiality. And as you know the issue wasn’t the kids running around so much as the belief they shouldn’t run around which motivated their parents to try to keep them from doing so and amplifying the situation. But being open to multiple generations means honouring how we are in different stages of life, children at play as worshipful as adults not. And though some of the visitors saw each other as enemies, you didn’t. You showed love, doing your best to withhold judgement and have compassion. That breaks down barriers and makes healing possible. Thank you for that. Now it was challenging, a reminder that taking to heart Jesus’ call to love as he does stretches us. But it stretches us for the better, our lives richer when we are in relationship with people from many backgrounds and experiences, have the opportunity to learn new ideas, to try new approaches, to set aside the question “what are they doing here?” in favour of a curious “I can’t wait to get to know them.”

It's putting into practice Nouwen’s words about hospitality, making space for strangers to become friends, not to turn them into us but to make room for them to be themselves. Did you know that host and hostility both come from the latin *hostis* or stranger. Too often in our world we see the stranger as a potential hostile but here we have the chance to shift that narrative and host the stranger with the expectation that we will both be changed as barriers come down, bonds are formed and each of us grows through the friendship. Again, this is taking to heart both Jesus’ statement about loving like him and Peter’s newfound conviction about the breadth of God’s love.

Beloved, in our gospel Jesus invites us to remain in his love, otherwise translated as abiding in his love. To abide is to dwell, to be held in a relationship of grace that is extended out in care for others. May this dwelling place of the church, this people of the resurrection, reflect that love, be a place where we can let go of enmity, where judgement is withheld in favour of curiosity and so strangers can become friends, where all generations can worship in their own way. As we do this we embody the way that Jesus lived, a way of unity and connection which makes it possible for everyone to flourish. It’s for that that Jesus came. Amen.