

St James United Church



Message for February 9, 2025

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

“Sharing into Union” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Cor.15:1-11; Luke 6:17-26; excerpt of Howard Thurman’s *Meditations of the Heart* and “The Peach Tree” by Kip Coggins, *Alternative Pathways to Healing: The Recovery Medicine Wheel* (Health Communications, 1990)

I have to admit when I saw today’s readings, especially the gospel set at the beginning of what is often called “The Sermon on the Plain”. I thought, “Wow. There couldn’t be a more appropriate text for what we are witnessing in our world right now.” I’m sure you noted it too as you listened, Jesus lifting up those who are persecuted, grieving, struggling, and promising future blessing, while at the same time calling out those experiencing the opposite and letting them know not only have they already received their reward but the time will come when things will be reversed. In this, Jesus echoes his mom’s words to Elizabeth as she sang how the hungry would be fed and the full sent away empty. It felt good to read that with all the upheaval many are facing. But then the more I pondered the text, the more down I felt, the sense of comfort I first had slipping away when I realized that for blessings to come to the grieving and persecuted, they first had to experience heartache. I don’t want anyone to feel that, not when right now it feels like the woe half of the text doesn’t happen without those getting a comeuppance initially hurting those that one day will be blessed. I thought, “Wow, this text is too accurate to be appropriate right now”.

I was distraught and considered setting it down and choosing something else. Fortunately, I didn’t. Instead, I prayerfully sat with it a bit longer, and as I did, I noticed something I glossed over in the opening as I rushed toward the blessings and woes. Listen to the first few lines again: “a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and Tyre and Sidon had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled by unclean spirits were healed.” This is a great and diverse multitude, both the elite and impoverished, Jews plus Gentiles, coming together to listen and learn, be healed and set free. Not just one group, but multiple, joined together in expectation of what Jesus was sent by God to bring to us.

This for me is the vision we need to hold before us right now in this time of woe before needed blessings. It’s a vision of unity in a time when a great deal of effort is being made to turn one group against another. Now some of that has backfired on both sides of the border recently. We see it in the patriotic surge across Canada, and our leaders working on a common response, even with the tariffs on a reprieve. We see it in protests happening in the US, even Republicans joining Democrats to stand against what people are calling a coup. But the unity in our gospel is deeper than commitment to support homegrown businesses, or political action in a time of threat. Rather what we see is a coming together across divides as people seek spiritual connection. And as they reach out to Jesus for help and healing, it says that power comes out of him.

Do you see the significance of that? A risk that's been set off should current protests help temper what is going on in the US and people regain at least some control of the government, is others will feel disenfranchised. There is risk of further division as one group exerts power over another, then back again. I'm not saying people shouldn't try to stop what is happening. That is definitely needed. But the dynamics are still adversarial and so no true liberation happens. In contrast, in the introduction of our blessings and woes text, there is an element of power as people seek union, but it's not power taken and wielded over others. It is power shared. That's key for unity in our world as we have mutual responsibility and affirm that we all have value, have merit.

This call to share power also recognises that there is one source of power, and we're not it. Too often humans try to come to unity through our own effort but as the gospel suggests there are unclean spirits, the drive to have power over others coming from a deeper impulse, a soul wound from generations of harming and being harmed that only grace can overcome. And so we need to turn to the only real source of power, the Eternal, the One from whom all things came into being, inspiring everything with divine light, life and love, us included, and not just us, but people who don't look like us or act like us or believe the same as us, but all of us having value, having merit because we are made in God's image and likeness, having power through that first holy power. We can ground ourselves in that as Howard Thurman writes - there is nothing quite like centering down as we let go for a time of the noise of our worries and doubts to draw into the centre of our hearts to encounter the Eternal. There we quench our thirst like Peach Tree in our earlier story. We need to nourish ourselves if we're to nourish others, keep prayerfully grounding ourselves as we advocate for others.

Like our gospel, the story of Peach Tree is also about shared power, especially as the people sing a healing song and all the elements join to help her. It images who we're to be as church as we care for each other. In this we model what we need in the world, for a time each week living into God's Reign. That reign ultimately is union in God but it is centred in our connection with each other. In this the church is a sign of reconciliation, not divided as we can be in the world, but that separation healed in grace as we pray for each other, encourage each other, forgive each other. This is the heart of Paul's experience of Jesus' resurrection, an encounter that brought him into a relationship with Christ that reconciled him not just to God but with the people he'd persecuted. That experience enabled him to later write that we are one in Christ. Once dividing identities no longer matter as we share power from one divine source. That holds as true now as then and invites us to be reconcilers. After all we hold diverse views and may not always agree. But here we can be in dialogue, seek understanding, show empathy, pray for healing, and live a unity otherwise lacking in our world.

So take heart in the readings we've been given to reflect upon, not so much for the blessings and woes in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, as important as they are, but the introduction to his words, diverse peoples seeking divine connection and discovering that it's found when they're connected to each other. That is ever our goal and Jesus continues to lead us toward it. Thanks be to God. Amen.