

# St James United Church

Message for February 23, 2025  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany



“Speaking Truth” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Cor. 15:35-50; Luke 6:39-45; from Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1:9, in *Porphyry, Life of Plotinus* (Turnbull, 1936), 49.

Over these last few weeks, we’ve been exploring what we can look to in the ministry of Jesus as a response in these difficult times. So far, we’ve looked at how he spent time in prayer, created communities of both solidarity and difference, and taught non-violent resistance. These all are ways to enact the final piece that we need in these times and that is to speak truth to power.

Jesus did just that earlier in Luke’s gospel at the start of his “Sermon on the Plain” when along with “Blessed are yous” he added “Woe to yous” as well. He was saying what needed to be said, unafraid to call out those who were hurting others. I believe we’re to do the same but not always confronting those in power directly as he did. As important is having conversations with people that not only put those leaders into power but keep them there. We may even have some of those conversations here. One of Jesus’ strategies, as I’ve said, was calling together people of varying backgrounds. We are one community but we’re not all alike and hold differing views.

Now I realize this is a challenge, almost scarier than a protest. Those conversations can get tense, even confrontational. Plus, we risk hypocrisy, if as Jesus says in our portion from Luke, we are pointing out the speck in a neighbour’s eye when we have a log in our own. Now you’d rightly say not all our neighbours have just a speck, given present circumstances. But even then, I hear him advise us that before we have “speaking truth” conversations with others, we need to do some personal truth-telling first. As he says, it’s about seeing clearly, including ourselves.

Fortunately, there are ways to do that work, a good starting point being our reactions to other people’s behaviour. When I was in theology school, I had a prof who used to remind us that when we point a finger at someone that three fingers point back at us. I’m sure you’ve heard that. It’s a helpful reminder that when I am annoyed at someone, my reaction often points to something I’m grappling with - an attitude, a trait, a bias. This invites me to do two things. One, to dial back the harshness of my reaction and instead extend some empathy. When I approach someone with whom I disagree with kindness rather than aggression, they’re more able to hear me and we can come to resolution more quickly. The second though is more significant. It invites me to do my own soul searching, to be honest with my issues and do the hard work of dealing with them. Plus, as I do my own soul work, I can then approach others with increasing empathy.

In this I found Plotinus’ reflection to be insightful as he drew on the image of a sculptor. In it I hear two things. First is the awareness of beauty in each of us. We often don’t affirm that, more

likely to judge ourselves, especially if we hear judgements from the broader society. Second is how a finished sculpture takes work. At the last Pub Theology, we had a couple of drop-ins who saw the event on Facebook. They were professors from MUN, one from Germany, the other from Ireland. They were delightful. Anyway, one of them offered a quote of philosopher Dallas Willard which speaks into this: “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.” That made a lot of sense to me. As Willard goes on, the issue around earning grace is that it is an attitude. Effort, on the other hand, is an action. We often approach grace as a magic eraser freeing us from sin but beyond that it’s really about growth, and that asks for some action or effort on our part.

At this point is where the other participant, who is Catholic, offered insight as he shared how meaningful he finds going to confession. He was respectful about Protestant concerns about a human acting as a mediator, but he framed it in terms of spiritual direction, the confessor being a friend with whom he shares his story, and who offers advice in dealing with his struggles, to help him grow spiritually. Just taking time for self-reflection is good, but as someone else suggested, telling another helps us be accountable. AA does the same with meetings and mentors. I’m not suggesting we all start going to confession, but I think he was right about the power of self-revelation, of getting counsel too, and in a world where there is so much judgement, getting the reassurance that God understands us, loves us, forgives us. Hearing that helps us keep doing the work in understanding ourselves, loving ourselves, forgiving ourselves, and from that we are more able to understand others, love others and forgive others. That in turn helps us to speak truth to power as Jesus did, not projecting our issues onto them but speaking truthfully with love.

This is where I found Paul helpful. His writing about how some people assumed we’re raised with a human body not a spiritual one reminded me how we all approach the world from a frame of reference. It applies to how we understand everything, not just spiritual matters. As I said, speaking truth to power includes speaking with people with different views than ours. We may both speak English but we’re using a different language, drawing on different sets of values. As the one making the approach, I need to set my value system aside for a time to see the world with their eyes. I’d begin by asking them to share a concern, echo it back to assure them I’m listening, then point to an aspect I can connect to, share a bit on that, offer some of my concerns, not all, and use their lexicon if I can. In recent years, progressive folks haven’t done this, shifting the words and terms that we’re to use, thus moving the goalposts just as a potential ally starts to get it, leaving them frustrated, even angry. This raises the need to accept critique, admitting negatives of “my side” and acknowledging positives of theirs. It’s about speaking truth, hearing some truth too. The aim is not to convert them (I won’t with just one conversation) but give them another view to consider, with a door left open for further dialogue.

The goal, as much as we are called as Jesus’ followers to live justly, and so speak truth to power as he did, is to bridge differences and nurture relationships. This is the heart of God’s Reign. We do this when we speak truth with openness, understanding and always with love. May it be so. Amen.