

St James United Church



Message for May 18, 2025

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Widening the Circle” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Revelation 21:1-6; Acts 11:1-18; Excerpt from Judy Cannato, *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Sorin Books, 2010), 8.

Poor Peter. He must have been so hangry that day on the rooftop when he saw a divine vision and was told to eat things considered unclean. On that sheet there might have been snakes or gulls or rats. All sorts of animals aren't considered kosher. No wonder he was quick to say no to God's instruction to eat, saying that nothing unclean had ever touched his lips. Thank goodness he discerned what the vision meant, and he baptized Cornelius, otherwise none of us would be here in this church, the message of Jesus kept within Jewish circles and so not spreading very far, certainly not to England and Ireland and so not to Newfoundland.

Peter's initial struggle and the opposition he received speaks to how difficult it can be for us as humans to widen who we include at the table, to use the image I used in our Learning Together time, more often guarding access to the meal than inviting more people to take part. And yet as we look at the life of Jesus, we see how he was always adding more seats at the table. To use a different image, we think in terms of circles with fixed borders. But Jesus' vision of God's Reign is open, so if there is a circle defining the community, he is not at its centre but the edge, and not to gate keep but speak with those too often seen as beyond the limit of God's grace.

Given this, I'd like to pick up the image of the *diakonos* we explored last week. As I shared, the first Christian *diakono*i were seven people commissioned to ensure that widows and other vulnerable people in the community were looked after. The image we have of them is waiting on tables. But it turns out that in the bible they also act as messengers, function as ambassadors. I first read about this in *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* by John N. Collins. He draws on how Hermes in Greek Mythology is described as a *diakonos*, but his role is as a go-between who spoke on behalf of Zeus. And this is what we see in the Book of Acts. No sooner were the seven commissioned than at least two began sharing the gospel, acting as ambassadors of Christ's love. Best known is Stephen, the first martyr, but there was Philip who left the centre of power in Jerusalem and went to the edge, preaching to their sworn enemies, the Samaritans, and then to an official from Ethiopia who as a eunuch straddled the line between genders. That didn't faze Philip, and he baptized him, compassionately welcoming him into beloved community in Christ. This is an important consideration as yesterday we marked International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, all on the rise around the world. It is a tragedy that so few Christians take their cue from Philip, instead reacting in fear of those they consider unclean.

What I love about Philip is that unlike Peter, he preached to the Samaritans and baptized the official without prompting. I wonder if Peter struggled at first, needing a hunger induced vision to shift his viewpoint, because he had a prominent role in the early church. Peter was used to people coming to him, but Philip was used to going out to people to respond to their needs. This is good to recall as we prepare to celebrate our 100th anniversary as a denomination. When we were first formed, we dreamed of being the church of Canada, and for a while we were as we were consulted by the government, prime ministers even attending meetings of General Council. But as we cozied up to the establishment, we forgot a key part of our history, how John Wesley, the founder of Methodism did the opposite, reaching out to those who had been overlooked, sending preachers to mines and factory towns, gathering working people into “classes” where they would study the bible and share what was on their hearts. He had the church go to the people not the other way around. It feels like we’re being called back to this part of our story.

I recently heard an example of just this in the Philippines. There is a priest there, Fr. Albert, who leads a ministry of serving coffee. It began in a university where he and a few others hosted what they called “Brew Talks,” a simple gathering for coffee, conversation, and an opportunity to build trust. People asked questions, mostly about the coffee, hardly ever about God. At first, they thought it was a bust, but then realized what was important was that they showed up, took time to listen, to be interested in people’s lives. Since then the ministry has moved into a coffee shop and conversations about God happen more often. But as he learned, “You don’t need to talk about God for God to be felt. All it takes is nurturing space where someone feels heard for God’s grace to pour in.” He found this most true with people who feel excluded from the church’s table.

His ministry is a simple way of expressing what we see in Revelation 21 as the writer witnesses a new Jerusalem coming out of the sky, God coming to dwell with us. This is opposite to what we’ve taught traditionally, framing faith as living good lives so when we die, we leave the earth to dwell with God. But here we see that God wants to be with us, to listen and to know what is on our hearts, in fact has always dwelled with us but we didn’t notice, especially as we viewed some foods, some animals, some people as unclean. But God draws near in compassion and love, healing our hearts so we are no longer closed but in peace can make room for others. We should note here that Jerusalem comes as a bride. It’s how the Jewish community describes Sabbath. On that day everyone is to pause from work, to not use money either, not just to rest but to reframe how they see others, to focus not on what they can do for them, even if just preparing coffee, but see them as beloved children of God, all of us joined in relationship. I like that. Jerusalem coming as a bride suggests we should apply this each day, all that we do, even our work is grounded in God’s compassion for everyone, doing what Jesus did, what Philip did, eventually what Peter did, and widen the circle of grace.

So, friends, may we do the same, called to be Jesus’ *diakonoï*, to move from the centre of our sanctuaries and go to the edges of our communities with a message not of fear, worried about what is clean and unclean, but of compassion, support and care. There like Jesus we will spend time with our neighbours, to listen and learn and be ambassadors of his grace. Like him we will do what we can to extend God’s love in ever wider circles of kindness, healing and love. Amen.