

# *St James United Church*



## Message for June 29, 2025 Memorial Sunday

“Choosing the Gospel Way” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

James 3:13-18; Luke 9:18-25; Muriel Rukseyer “Poem (I lived in the first century of world wars)”

We feel many different emotions each Memorial Day. We're reflective, saddened, and not just for the fallen but as Sarah shared for the families broken by the loss. We may feel proud, patriotic, like many felt last year as the unknown soldier was laid to rest. This year I feel nervous given the state of the world. The whole point of marking such occasions, at least from a Christian view, is to remember the tragic cost of war as a way to call us to peace, but this year it feels like we're again embodying attitudes that will lead us to war yet again.

Given this, it is tempting (using a phrase from the 50s and 60s) to want to “duck and cover,” to focus on self-protection and withdraw from the world. I get that. I sometimes wonder if Glen and I could disappear into the woods, live off grid and hope for the best. In Christian history some people have done more than just wonder, one group or another taking “duck and cover” to a new level and setting up a community on their own. They heeded James' view (a bit beyond where today's reading left off) that friendship with the world is enmity with God, that in the world we risk getting caught up in bitter envy and selfish ambition, a desire for wealth, status, power, rather than following the way of gentleness and peace that James suggests is the heart of God's wisdom. Some even take to heart Jesus' words about denying themselves, like monks or nuns renouncing status, property and family, or the Amish avoiding modern technology. It's not for everyone, but you certainly can't miss their dedication to Christ.

Now I don't feel called to either path, but they model an approach we can learn from, especially when it comes to war, or more specifically attitudes that lead to war. I'm sure many of you would agree that while ambition, greed or envy may be drivers toward it, pulling us from God's way as James suggests, what perpetuates war is grief and anger, emotions which obscure my ability to see my “enemy” as human, and actually feed my need to be better than, have more than, be more successful than them. That's how the world works but not motivators I associate with the Amish who live simply with a dedication to their interpretation of the gospel with profound result.

Consider this story from nearly twenty years ago. The context is rural Pennsylvania, a cluster of Amish farms set apart from towns and cities. Children attend a one-room schoolhouse. I picture “Little House on the Prairie” and would never imagine anything bad happening. Yet one day a non-Amish man who regularly picked up milk from them came to the school and opened fire. He shot ten girls, killing five, then killed himself. It is a tragedy that would lead many of us wanting

vengeance, war even. But this community knew the gospel, lived a path that Muriel Rukeyser names in counterpointing her experience of war with a desire to reconcile, and not just with others but herself. And so not long after the shooting, a grandfather of one of the girls who was killed forgave the killer, then Amish neighbours visited his family to offer them comfort, the family was invited to the funeral of a girl who'd been killed, Amish mourners outnumbered non-Amish at his funeral, and they gave money to the widow and her children. Staggering, isn't it? And before we ask how they moved on so quickly, know that they didn't. Like any of us, they were grief-stricken and many sought counselling to deal with it. But they didn't let their sorrow twist into the anger that leads to war, chose instead to forgive, show compassion, reconcile as Jesus taught.

I'm not suggesting we need to be like the Amish and withdraw from the world to do this, as tempting as it can be right now. But they do offer approaches I feel we could emulate in this time. The first is that they are intentional about choosing the gospel (albeit based on their particular interpretation) rather than the way of the world. It's a challenge, so immersed are we in culture we're not even aware how much our go to is more worldly than gospel. It's why Jesus' tells his disciples to pick up their cross daily. He knows that taking on his heart is a long, slow process, takes intention. So, the Amish, like monks and nuns make prayer and bible study a consistent part of their lives. Living more simply helps with this, I'm sure. Less need to acquire things, or even keep things, means not having to be part of the rat race as much. Plus, simple living and gratitude go together. In this I am aware that all I have is a gift from God rather than earned by me and needing to be protected. I have less to prove in relation to others, less need to compete. And as I take time in prayer, listen for God, I slow down enough to discover my true self, the God-breathed self at my heart. As I draw on that awareness, I recognize the same in others, helping me not to see an enemy so quickly, not even in my grief, or hurt or anger. This in turn motivates me to study the bible, as an act of prayer, and to seek a worldview that affirms the growing connection I feel, the deepening pull to live righteously, not in terms of purity but with good intentions toward others. We can do the same. The aim is really rewiring our minds and hearts, in prayer, in study, in simplicity discovering a different mode of living from what the world teaches. I'm not Amish so I focus my study on discerning how to apply gospel in a modern context, but the result is the same, grounding my decisions in the wisdom of God, in their love so I don't fall repeatedly into patterns that lead to comparison, competition, and too often to war.

On this Memorial Sunday I have many feelings, including nervousness about where the world is heading. But I don't need to stay in fear. Instead I can take time for study and prayer, to take on the heart of Jesus and put his teachings into practice. For me that won't mean withdrawing from the world. In fact, like many of us it may mean the opposite, engaging head on, mobilising, going to a protest, calling our leaders to account, equally valid ways to follow the way of Jesus. But as we do, may we ground our response in prayer and study so we can apply Jesus' way of forgiveness, compassion, reconciliation, and especially peace. That's the best way I feel we can honour those who gave their lives in war - choose a different path than what led us there. Amen.