

St James United Church



Message for September 21, 2025

Welcome Back Sunday (3rd Sun in the Season of Creation)

“Working within Our Culture” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13; “On the Mystery of the Incarnation” by Denise Levertov

It's Welcome Back Sunday and we're still in the Season of Creation. Our prayers and readings reflect these themes and I so wish I could only speak to them right now; but too much is going on in the world – like threats in the US for it to be illegal to criticize the president, increasingly aggressive anti-immigration rallies in the UK, the notwithstanding clause likely to be invoked in Alberta to suspend the rights of people who are trans - all realities that I believe we should reflect upon spiritually. I did that somewhat last week, and in that regard, there are things I should have said but didn't. The first is that it was wrong that Charlie Kirk was killed. I decry violence and in no way is it ever a solution when we disagree with someone. Also, when I said we should pray for our American neighbours, we should have prayed for Charlie Kirk's family. They're grieving and I should have acknowledged that. I am grateful for the person who questioned why I hadn't.

The fact that I hadn't is a reminder to me of how easily we can get pulled into divisive thinking. Our focus needs to be on God's reign and divisive thinking doesn't serve that. God's reign, or God's kin-dom is more than heaven but our lives shaped by heaven, that is a world shaped by God's vision for us and creation, rather than just human thinking. That world is to reflect values named in one religious tradition after another: hospitality, compassion, forgiveness, equity, justice, respect, cooperation, understanding, peace, care for others as well as the earth. These aren't just idealism but rather ideals that can be acted upon, made concrete in how we live.

And yet despite the testimony of thousands of years of prayerful reflection, they are treated as idealistic, not in touch with the real world. Consequently, I often feel like Jeremiah, lamenting his community: “My joy is gone;...my heart is sick...For the brokenness of the daughter of my people, I am broken!” You may feel this way too, overwhelmed and perhaps unsure what to do. That wasn't the case for Jeremiah. His lament comes after his call by God to speak truth to the leaders of his community, after he has done that despite being harassed and will continue doing even as threats escalate and authorities try to kill him. He laments because he trusts something better is possible for his people. He has hope, affirmed in the Book of Lamentations that despite all he has gone through, left feeling like his life is wormwood and gall, God's love is steadfast, enduring as surely as the sun rises each day. He trusts that even if it feels like nothing is shifting, in the end God's vision will be realized. This kept him going, helped him to keep prophesying.

He understood that religion is not about escaping our context but responding within it, and in his parable about a dishonest steward, Jesus shares a similar view. Consider the end of the story.

The rich man commends his steward despite doing something shifty. There are two explanations for why he went to one tenant after another to reduce their debt to his boss. One is he is sacrificing his commission on what the farmers owe the landowner, counting on them to help him later. The other is that he trusts no one knows he's been let go yet and so they think the landowner is being generous, making it problematic for him to fire the steward. Either way, he uses standard practice to get out of his situation. And so his boss commends his shrewdness. Jesus does too but with a caveat - we are to be as shrewd in service of true riches as the steward was with dishonest gain.

We're to do this because we are part of this world, part of our society, our culture. We sometimes think that we need to either separate ourselves from society or to be in a constant struggle with it, necessary because it is human and so as fallen, as sinful as we are. But Jesus came to show us how the world can be transformed. It can be because we are not irredeemable. We are wounded in many ways, do what we do because of that, but always carry within us the image of God. This is not just an individual reality but a collective one, and so societies, cultures can also be vehicles of the sacred, can lead us toward God's kin-dom. That's what Jesus did as he took examples from his culture to teach us, transformed everyday practices like a meal into an encounter with grace. He reminded us that God is the one who deserves worship, not political systems, economic policies, even religions, and our worship, our love for God, is shown in our love for others. In the parable Jesus invites us to use our culture in service of that love, to embody the values of God's kin-dom.

It could be our home. For example, I recently watched a video of a man in England who knocked on his Muslim neighbour's door to invite his family to stay with him if they felt unsafe as anti-immigrant sentiment ramps up there. Another tool is social media, often used to spread hate. It can combat it too, shrewdly in this moment, people changing words so their messages don't get blocked. One fellow posted an invitation to come to a concert, actually a protest. Comedy is a potent way to challenge unjust policies, hence the cancelling of shows right now, but those are just the big names. We can support local comedians, artists, musicians, playwrights, indie film producers, as they challenge the system. Then there is the most venerated tool, money. We can direct it to businesses that embody compassion, hospitality, respect, cooperation, peace; and withhold it, boycotting businesses that don't. These are tools Jesus calls on the children of light to use, calls on us to use, to transform our society in service of God's reign, of their kin-dom.

These are challenging times, but we don't need to resign ourselves. As Jesus makes clear, it is not only each of us as individuals who can be transformed in grace, but our culture, social structures transformed too and used to lift up others, to model the vision God has for us. Despite all that is going on, I trust that God's love will triumph. As our hearts can be healed in grace, so too can our systems, culture, used as a means to love God, to care for the earth, to serve one another. May that be so. Amen.