

St James United Church



Message for October 19, 2025 Social Action Sunday

“Reoriented toward Justice” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Jeremiah 31:27-24; Luke 18:1-8 and an Adaptation of Brian McLaren and Gareth Higgins, “Domination Stories,” Learning How to See podcast, season 5, episode 2 (Albuquerque, NM)

Each year around the time of Thanksgiving in Canada, the international community marks two days – World Food Day, a time to consider issues of hunger and food security, and the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, which is why we often discuss a subject like a guaranteed livable income around this time. It may be a quirk, but it feels right that these days come as so many of us gathered to share a meal to show gratitude for our blessings.

As I said last week, gratitude is an attitude, a way of seeing the world, inviting us to look at all that connects us, all we have received through the layers of relationship we share. I appreciate that. I do need to reorient myself from time to time, or as the Bible calls it, repent. Repentance is also about seeing things differently; and living differently too. And even though we are told that the parable Jesus shared in our selection from Luke is about persisting in prayer, it seems more about repentance, as the judge helps the widow, even if begrudgingly. Sometimes repentance is like that. We may see that we need to change, but it takes time to get completely on track, especially as we may be pulled by habitual practice, ingrained thinking, or social pressure.

We see that pressure in how we often approach parables. We often read them like allegories about God. And when we do that, we often place God in the most powerful position in the story, which in this case is the judge. Given what happens, we are left with an unsavoury picture of God, answering prayer simply to be rid of us. I think it says a lot more about us than we’d like to admit. It points to Brian McLaren’s and Gareth Higgins’ conversation about the first creation story as humans are given dominion, part of what it means to be made in God’s image and likeness. That we interpret that as domination, sharing in God’s power and authority rather than in God’s creative empowerment says a lot about us and the cultural assumptions we hold rather than biblical values. Which again invites repentance, to reorient how we see ourselves and consequently how we relate to each other.

What if the parable was simply a commentary on the world that Jesus knew, where the rich and powerful called most of the shots, and in this instance only gave in to the needs of the widow to avoid the risk of bad publicity? It sounds like our own. And in this world that threat of bad publicity works to our advantage, as does the threat of losing business, or civil litigation, all ways we can protest to bring about change, in a way to call for repentance. We saw this yesterday in the “No Kings” rallies in the US and around the world. It is slow going but non-violence is the only way to bring lasting change. When we do we embody God’s way, encouragement and not

exploitation, again as reflected in Genesis, gently inviting everything into being. I pray that protestors stay gentle, loving, peaceful. We know the opposite can have a detrimental effect, enabling those who do the harm to frame themselves as victims of harm.

Beyond Jesus making a comment on the state of his world and ours, what if we were to treat his parable as an allegory after all but to cast the characters opposite? What if we were to reorient our view and imagine God as the widow coming to the judge again and again, lovingly, non-violently, calling for justice? That aligns better with scripture. What did we hear last Sunday from Deuteronomy as someone is instructed about how to make a harvest offering? They were to recall the rescue of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt, a reminder of God's loyalties, not just in the past but consistently calling for an end to injustice of any kind, calling for repentance of their failure to care for orphans, widows, displaced people, other vulnerable groups. The people were to live differently than what their ancestors experienced, providing a future akin to that imaged in the past, in the second creation story, the world a garden with humans tending it with care. God is with us in that, again and again encouraging us to live justly and with love.

When we do that, we make it better not just for people who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and other injustices, but for society as a whole. Studies show that in nations where there is a smaller gap between wealthiest and most impoverished, the health outcomes are better for the top tier as well as the bottom, with less anxiety, better mental health, longer life expectancy, less violence, the list goes on. A more equal society is one where we're more inclined to look after one another, place safeguards into our society as the Bible infers, which is better all round because it costs less to house people, pay enough to live on, offer emotional supports, than it does to hospitalize, incarcerate or police people. And long-term impacts are better because we create a situation where past hurt isn't passed to the next generation, or as Jeremiah put it, "they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'" The saying speaks about ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma, experiences that have a genetic impact but can be reversed when factors contributing to trauma are addressed.

I realize all this sounds very socio-political, not surprising given it is Social Action Sunday. But there is a spiritual component to it. Jeremiah's vision of a new covenant is where we no longer live God's way because we are following a set of rules, but because the law of love is written on our hearts. We nurture that in our lives in prayer, worship, contemplation, meditating on scripture, connecting with nature, listening to music, as we still our minds to listen for the permission-giving, life-animating presence of God in us, our neighbours, the world. That gentle presence calls us to see the world differently, to repent, inviting us back to the harmony of Genesis, the liberation of Exodus, the renewal of Jeremiah, the justice-seeking love of Jesus. It brings us back to the mind-set gratitude cultivates in us, recognizing that my blessings and others' are part of one blessing in God. We are called to care for, not dominate each other. God helps us see this through grace.

On this Social Action Sunday, let us reorient our hearts and open them to the grace that enables us to seek a more just world, where justice is grounded in love. God is with us in this, with us as we seek it gratefully, peacefully, persistently. Amen.