

St James United Church



Message for November 2, 2025

All Saints Sunday

“Every Life Worth Affirming” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 19:1-10; an excerpt from Christina Baldwin's *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story* (Vancouver, BC: New World Library, 2005)

I like All Saints Day and its companion, All Souls Day. The distinction is subtle, the first a time to honour all the people not officially designated as saints but we trust are in heaven, in union with God. The second honours everyone who has died, acknowledges that they may not be in heaven but knowing God's loving mercy, probably are, but because we are less forgiving than God we figure they need to linger somewhere for a bit, perhaps a lengthy bit. In either case we're lifting up the sanctity of every life, everyone having the capacity for goodness, so worthy of being affirmed for having lived, remembered even if we don't know their names.

It's a beautiful sentiment, isn't it? More than that it is the heart of the gospel, the approach Jesus took again and again in his encounters with people. In the first few chapters of Luke, the gospel we're focused on, he heals someone with leprosy; forgives a paralyzed man lowered in front of him by friends; eats with tax collectors and others' judged as sinners; heals the male attendant of a Roman centurion; teaches his followers to love their enemies, to forgive others multiple times, to consider as a neighbour whoever is in need; instructs his followers to accept hospitality from whomever gives it, eating whatever is put before them; the list goes on. He repeatedly affirms, helps and heals. When he's more challenging in his words, it is to confront those who aren't as open-hearted but instead pull others down, hoard what they have, think only of themselves.

We see an example of his approach in the portion of Luke that we read from this morning, as the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, climbs up a tree because it is the best way for him to see Jesus as he passes by. It's been a favourite in Sunday School across generations, kids knowing what it is like to not be able to see someone because they are smaller. And yet, is Zacchaeus the short one? Or is it Jesus? The original Greek is ambiguous. There's something interesting going on in the assumption that the tax collector is small in stature. We assume he is lower in his moral standing too, take the judgment of the crowd at face value. But what does Zacchaeus say when Jesus says he will stay at the tax collector's home? He will give half of his possessions to the poor, five times as much as any tithe, and pay back four times as much if he defrauded anyone. We jump to the conclusion he must have defrauded people, but he says "if," suggesting that any cheating was unintentional. Zacchaeus may have been a better person than we assume based on his role, judged by his peers for working with the Romans, judged by us because we still really dislike taxes.

Which makes me wonder if Jesus already knew that, invited himself over to Zacchaeus' for the crowd's benefit more than the tax collector's, challenging the community for their quick judgment, challenging all of us for how swift we are to write others off when everyone is worthy of being affirmed, each of us much more than our moral failings. The Babemba illustrate that viewpoint in their ritual of story-telling when a community member does something wrong, as they help the person remember the good things they have done, ways they helped in the community. It acknowledges that as difficult as it is for others to forgive us when we have hurt them, we sometimes struggle more to forgive ourselves, defining ourselves by our failings, gripped not by guilt, which admits wrongdoing and seeks to redress it, but by shame as we think of ourselves as bad, even if we redressed the wrong, even when the other person has forgiven us.

Our tendency to hold to a negative self-image does damage, can only be held for so long before we break, and end up needing to project our judgment onto others, to scapegoat them. Which is what we see the crowd doing. But Jesus steps in to remind them that Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham and Sarah like any of them, reminds them of what they share, reminds them too of the One with a more profound love than any of us can give ourselves or others, of God who is quick to forgive, who later in the story, in Jesus accepting to be a scapegoat, to take all of our judgments onto himself, turns the cross from an instrument of condemnation to a sign of all-embracing love. And God does this because it is in God's nature, choosing to restore us in their love, choosing to do this long before the foundation of the world, not because we deserve it or don't deserve it, but simply to affirm the sanctity of everyone, simply to honour each and every life, ultimately sealing everyone through the gift of the Spirit.

What if Zacchaeus was bad after all, Jesus saw that but still invited himself over? What I said remains because God is still God, Jesus still Jesus, and their inclusive, affirming love stands. Which is why Zacchaeus is anxious enough to see Jesus that he climbs a tree, not a dignified move for an influential, though judged member of the community. I see grace in his desire, which as I shared last week, always begins with God, God reaching out to us, to Zacchaeus, inspiring his need to see Jesus, which results in a meeting and more than that, a relationship. As they spoke, I'm sure Jesus affirmed all he was, reminded him that he was more than others' judgment of him as a tax collector. That conversation is the meaning of sanctifying grace, God's love working in our hearts, affirming us as beloved, and in that, calling us to offer the same to others, loving them and when needed, to remind them of who they are deep down. One way we nurture that love is to share communion, which we'll do shortly, and take time in prayer, attending to God's presence within, in each to connect to God loving us, to the presence of the Spirit giving us strength and peace. And we can also look to the lives of others for inspiration, not just official saints but ordinary people loving others, affirming them into their best selves.

On this day, we affirm that could be any of us, drawing on grace to love others in any number of ways, to be saints. And then perhaps one day people will seek to grow deeper in God's grace by looking at how we lived and then follow our examples, and then in turn others will follow theirs. So, let's celebrate - honouring the connections we share, that every life needs affirming, all held in God's great love. Amen.