

St James United Church



Message for November 16, 2025 Congregational Anniversary Sunday

“The Call to Listen” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Is. 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19; excerpt from Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink from the Cup?* Ave Maria Press, 1996)

Each year as we get deeper into Fall and head toward Winter, the lectionary focuses on the end times, when the world transitions from one age to the next. This always feels appropriate given the gloomy seasonal transition, leaves fallen to reveal skeletal trees. It's a fallowing time as the earth prepares for Spring. Given all of this, this month is traditionally the time of year when we pray for departed loved ones. It is all appropriate that we mark this time with these readings and prayers, and yet this is also the time of year when we celebrate our congregational anniversary.

I was tempted then to set aside the readings we just heard and to look for something more in keeping with celebrating sixty-seven years as a congregation, sixty-four gathering in this space. Yet the more I searched, the more I felt drawn to these readings, the gospel especially, even though Jesus tells the disciples that the stones they marveled at would be knocked down, and everything they knew of their gathering space would be no more.

It spoke to me because Jesus' emphasis is not on the temple, nor its destruction, not even the challenges the disciples would face as they experienced persecution, but his presence with them through the power of the Spirit. We need to recall the timing of this story in the longer narrative of the gospel. Over the course of a few more pages, Jesus will meet with them for a last meal, be arrested and killed. He is preparing them for this calamity. It will feel for them like a time of war and disaster. But he promises that despite how overwhelmed they'll feel, that they will get through it because he will be with them, the Spirit present to assist them as they speak with governors and kings. How? In what he says in John's gospel, there to remind them of what they had done with Jesus and all that he had taught them.

And Jesus kept that promise. Through his presence they were able to face their challenges as a community gathered in his name, not by looking back on what had been, but forward to the future. As they did, they sought to embody his teachings in a new way and changed context. As they focused on the relationships they shared through him, they connected with others in the neighborhood, drew on mutual resources to provide for people in need, applied the justice-seeking, inclusive way of Jesus to be an alternative community to that of the dominant society. In other words, they did what we've been about as a congregation for nearly seven decades. Over the years, we've hosted a pumpkin carving for neighborhood kids, gone to the Waterford Hospital to support patients, helped with the local United Church camp, sponsored refugee families, supported youth as they grew in faith, offered a meal along with friendship to seniors, provided a home base for university chaplaincy, cultivated a community where everyone belongs regardless

of sexuality or other life experiences, encouraged people to connect with God in nature, made space for groups to get started be it other churches, religious groups, community agencies like Quadrangle, it goes on. And though we did it in this space, we knew that our ministry was not about these four walls but living out our slogan, Belong, Grow, Serve, the Spirit always there to guide, sometimes goad, calling us to listen to those around us.

And the Spirit is still with us, inviting us to keep listening, to discern how to embody Jesus' way as the context changes yet again. We're doing that in a few ways over the next while. One is a plan to simply walk our neighbourhood, prayerfully open to what's going on, chatting with folks that we meet, looking at the needs that we see, discerning how we can help with those or partner with others to do so. We're looking for four to six people to walk, preferably weekly so we can see ongoing versus temporary needs, and also build relationships. Another listening task is to meet people from MUN and CNA to get a sense of how we can offer love and caring to students as well as to faculty. We will need a small team of three or four to get us going on that initiative.

Finally, there is the "Next Chapter" process Pamela spoke to a few weeks ago. This a multi-year process to prayerfully consider how we might use our property resources and people power to serve the evolving needs of St. John's for generations to come. This involves having conversations as a congregation as well as with neighbours and community partners, being honest about this space and our changing demographics. Now I realize that the thought of changing what we do or talking about making changes to our property, either in part or as a whole, may feel like the world we know is ending. But it didn't end for the disciples when Jesus' death meant pivoting in a new direction, not even as they faced significant challenges. If anything they felt him with them more powerfully as he guided them to live out his teachings in ways they never could have imagined. It won't end for us either. He'll be with us as we take time to ponder what the future holds for our neighbours, open to the Spirit's guidance as we've always done. I trust that.

It's about our ministry as we seek to be the body of Christ. It's what Henri Nouwen speaks to in describing community as a mosaic. In one sense he means us, what we do together a joining of many parts, each of us pitching in, admitting too how we're less the alternative community Jesus invites us to be if someone is absent, perhaps by choice, but also because we may have pushed them away. We need to face up to that possibility and reach out, listen to why they left, don't feel part of the mosaic, consider where we failed in that and reconcile. I feel though that Nouwen also invites us to think wider, to consider who in the neighborhood isn't here, or aren't partners in a project, listen to ways we've excluded them, and again do something about that. The face of Christ needs all the mosaic pieces to be whole, not just ones with which we're most comfortable.

We can only make that possible if we keep reaching out, keep listening and then responding. And as we do we reflect the vision in our Isaiah reading, with people living in a renewed community where there is peace and diverse expressions of life, wolf, lamb, ox and lion eating together. That is what have strived to be for sixty-seven years, and will for at least sixty-seven more. We may do it differently than in the past, let some things go, and that is ok. We're in a season of change, but it is a transition, not an end. The Spirit is with us, guiding us and bringing new life. Amen.