

St James United Church



Message for July 26, 2026

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

“God’s Dream” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 29:15-30; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves* (Cormorant Books, 2017)

If you ever needed a reason why we don’t take the bible literally, today’s readings give you a few.

First, there is the reading from Genesis 29 as Jacob labours for seven years for his uncle, only to be tricked into marrying Leah, not Rachel. To a contemporary reader the story is morally fraught. We have a sense of Jacob’s and Laban’s intentions, but what of the sisters? Where is their agency? They don’t have any. They seem pawns in a story focused on the consequences of one’s actions, Jacob deceived as his father had been when Rebekkah put goat pelts on his arms to make Isaac think Jacob was Esau. That trick is as shaky as Jacob mistaking Leah for Rachel even though he’d pined for her for seven years. Those plot holes remind us that these are not histories, but origin stories and morality tales.

Then we have our problematic parables. Mustard is useful, both culinary and medicinal, but it was not to be intentionally planted because it takes over. In our context it’d be like comparing the kingdom of heaven to a dandelion. Then there’s the yeast mixed into flour. Yeast was associated with decay, coming from fermentation. A bit of neglected leavening starter easily grows mouldy. The parables about treasure are questionable too, the first about someone deceiving the owner of the land where he found treasure to get it himself, and the second a story about wealth concentrated in the hands of one person without any thought for the impact on others. And don’t get me started on the image of the net of fish being sorted between good and bad.

Like I said, problematic. So, what do we do? We could walk away from these texts as a source of inspiration in our lives. Plenty of people do and declare those who turn to it intellectually naïve. That conclusion is based on an assumption that the bible’s to be read literally, when from the first decades of Christianity, and in Judaism before that, our ancestors in faith looked past the surface to consider other layers, what a text can mean morally, allegorically, metaphorically, spiritually. This asks us to wrestle with it, and from that to find wisdom, even amid difficulties in the story.

Which coincidentally, is the first bit of wisdom I draw from today’s stories, how grace can be encountered in the midst of struggle, not that it is wished for by God, or planned, but that the good can come out of our weakness and failures. That’s the overarching message of the whole tale of our spiritual patriarchs and matriarchs. There is a lot of dysfunction in these families, and sin, just like in any of our families, but despite that, God’s promise that the world’s nations will be blessed through their descendants still happens, even as they mess up, even as they reap the harvest of their actions. I take comfort in that, suggesting that God’s mission of love, of peace for

the world, God's way of restorative justice will emerge, bit by bit, even when on the surface it seems to recede at times, especially right now in our conflict strangled, ecologically shaky world.

And I don't just mean this at a high level, like God's dream for us only unfolds over millennia. I believe it unfolds in our lives, and not only in moments when we're actively doing good, but in more troubling times too. We see these as we look back, and not like the classic poem about the footprints in the sand and Jesus carrying us. That might be the case, but there might be times we found the strength to keep going on our own even as we endured deep hurt, other times when the footprints doubled back or veered off, perhaps there is a bum print as we sat down to sort out a few things, and other times when there are multiple sets of footprints as the community rallied around us, but over time we kept moving forward, learning and growing with the Spirit's help.

That is the thrust of the dystopian story, *The Marrow Thieves*. It is a chilling story of ecological catastrophe where most people can't dream, which leads to insanity, unless they are given serum made from the bone marrow of those who still can, Indigenous people, who rounded up and held in schools where their marrow is harvested even though it kills them. Like I said, chilling. The story though is focused on those who evade capture and hold on to the hope that they'll survive by going back to the land to help it heal. If they can, the big dream, God's dream, can continue. They do this with much heartache, like for Miigwan who believes his husband Isaac died, but in holding onto each other the dream lives on.

Which is more wisdom from the parables. God's dream of love, compassion, restorative justice and peace lives, even if just in a tiny notion that we hold in our hearts, a moment in prayer of the love at the heart of everything that we draw on, or just two or three sharing the way of Jesus despite a hard-hearted turn in the world. It doesn't take much to bring about change, and once it starts, there's no stopping it. There's an adage attributed to Augustine that without us God will not and without God we cannot. I've heard this called participatory eschatology, a fancy way of saying that God's mission of love will only unfold as we come alongside God. I wonder if that puts too much focus on us. Yes, a point that Jesus is making in the parables about the field and the pearl, is that once we find the treasure, find movement toward God's kin-dom. we need to go all in, but just the same the treasure is in the field, the pearl still waiting to be bought. The same is true of God's unfolding dream. It is emerging over time. I find that comforting with everything going on in the world, helps me not give up. Does it mean we just leave it and hope for the best? No. But it isn't all dependent on us either. Our job is to be attentive to what God is up to, come alongside it, even if it isn't happening in church, join others in the unfolding of God's love and peace. We're all doing this in different ways, and that is such a gift. Each embodiment of love, our embodiment of love, is God's presence in the world.

As I began, I noted that at times bible stories can be troubling. They reflect the troubles of the world, as much as of God's unfolding grace. But amid the trouble, I'm confident that God's dream continues, continues in our hope, continues in our persistence, continues in the love we share, not just on our own but in community. So, let's keep looking past the surface, watching for where love, peace, justice, compassion, gifts of God's Spirit are emerging, then help it along. Amen.