

St James United Church



Message for August 2, 2026 Emancipation Sunday

“We Need the Social Context” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21; and John Wesley, “Thoughts Upon Slavery” (V, 3)

Today is an important day as we mark the one hundred and ninety-second anniversary since The Slavery Abolition Act came into effect across the British Empire. This is a time to reflect not just on the history of chattel enslavement, as critical as that is, but to ponder why, after so many decades of progress, anti-Black racism and other prejudices are again on the rise. And that isn't just happening in the US and Europe. Just last week, there was an event near North Bay billed as “Bigotfest” which, along with a pig roast and knife throwing, showcased Diagonoln, and other white supremacist organizations. I have such difficulty understanding how an event like this could take place, not when it seems so clear to me that we're all siblings in the world. But this idea isn't universally held, not even by all Christians despite the witness of Jesus.

One difficulty, I feel, is how we tend to isolate bible passages from each other rather than seek connections, resulting in partial interpretations. Consider today's story from Matthew 14. Just on its own it's a miracle story. With just five loaves of bread and two fish more than 5,000 people were fed, given enough to eat that they were satisfied, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers! The story is often considered to be about God's generosity, viewed as proof that God can do much with a little, if only we're willing to let go so others can be blessed, and is considered a precursor to the sacrament of communion. Such interpretations spiritualize it, make it about how God, through Jesus, will bless us. That's true but misses much of the point.

They miss the social context of the story. Consider how it opens with the line, “Now when Jesus heard this.” That refers to the story right before, of John the Baptist's death when during a lavish banquet, Herod Antipas' stepdaughter danced for him and as reward he gave her John's head on a platter. It's a macabre story. And it must have shook Jesus, hence his need to withdraw to pray, to also be away from crowds so as not to draw the attention of the authorities. But when the crowds followed him, he didn't send them away but helped them, cured the sick. This is the second time he felt such compassion for the crowd, the first time Matthew telling us they were like sheep without a shepherd. That metaphor is political. Leaders were imaged as shepherds. That usage when Matthew first wrote of his compassion, plus the juxtaposition with the story of John's death, should remind us of Ezekiel's prophecy about the corruption and greed of the elite. All of that is there as Jesus' shows compassion not just at the start of the day but at its end when he tells his disciples to feed the people. Unlike Herod who feasted lavishly at the expense of the poor, Jesus' miracle was likely the first time many had

had their fill. Feeding them was a tangible response to their plight, and dare I say a political response. So much for just a spiritual blessing.

That said, such kindness does flow out of God's blessing, a source of comfort and hope in the face of oppression. But that shifts when you hold power. Then a spiritual message makes it easier to ignore the social expectations of following Jesus, of living God's way. That tripped us up hundreds of years ago and does so today. Take Genesis 32 as Jacob wrestled a stranger. Like the gospel story, at face value it is about an encounter with God, Jacob blessed and given the name Israel for persevering. On its own it highlights chosenness for the people bearing his name. That isn't bad in itself, also a comfort in times of persecution, and doesn't need to be exclusive. But for some settlers in the West Bank, it fuels prejudice toward Palestinians. God's supposed promise is used to justify the violent displacement of Palestinians living there rather than motivates two nations to accommodate one another. What if we read the story in its wider context? It becomes a tale of growth more than blessing. Jacob, the cheater of the past chose not to run but to wrestle with his guilt, what he did to his brother. As a result, Jacob (aka Israel) reconciled with Esau. What if the Israeli government focused on that? We need to consider other bible stories in the same way, looking beyond spiritual messages to their social context.

This is why as we consider multiples texts as they relate to one another and wrestle with them, as we look at the whole biblical narrative and its evolving message, we can't stop there. We need to consider that alongside what's going on in the world. That's what John Wesley did as he applied Jesus' teaching to the great sin of his age, chattel slavery. He saw the results of that sin every day as he walked around Bristol, confronted with the wealth of the merchants, knew it was accrued through great cruelty, in actions that ran counter to the gospel despite the faith they professed. His words were true for merchants here. Newfoundland played a part in the slave trade. Ships from the Caribbean came here after unloading human cargo, brought molasses and rum, brought cod to England. Some slave ships were even built here. That should make us pause. Thankfully, Wesley's words along with the pleas of other abolitionists, including the formerly enslaved, changed people's hearts and enslavement was abolished.

Yet, as I say that, we know that the issues and attitudes, the greed and sense of superiority that led to the transatlantic slave trade didn't suddenly disappear with a law coming into effect. Even now racism lurks in our society, anti-Black racism especially, combined in Canada with anti-Indigenous racism. It manifests in police profiling; disparities in the justice system; bias in healthcare, microaggressions in school, at work, even in churches; inflated costs for housing; barriers to getting a loan; the list goes on. These injustices, and many others, invite us to keep wrestling with the bible, to see what wisdom it offers in the long struggle for equity.

We need wisdom because the Act of Abolition was but one act in the long push for freedom. As our gospel makes clear, following Jesus demands that our compassion includes a struggle for justice. After all, the injustice which the crowd faced was why Jesus needed to respond. And not just him, Jesus instructing his disciples to feed the crowd, in other words for them to respond to the injustice they faced in tangible, even political ways. May we do likewise. Amen.