

St James United Church



Message for August 16, 2026

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

“The Power of Mercy” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:10-28; and an excerpt from Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 211-212

What powerful readings - stories of encouragement, conversion, reconciliation. Each uplifts mercy, although coming to this virtue in different ways, even from extraordinary starting places.

The most obvious is the reading from Genesis 45 as Joseph reconciles with his brothers. It's a poignant encounter as he cried so loudly the whole palace heard him. This wasn't gentle tears but a chest-heaving, ugly cry as all his pent-up emotions came out. And he had much to come out, not just sold into slavery but imprisoned, only working his way into a position of power after much trauma and heartache. I trust he gained self-awareness about his earlier behaviour, but not enough to not toy with his brothers before his reveal, imprisoning Simeon on trumped up spying charges, hiding the brothers' money in the grain they bought which would have caused panic, framing Benjamin for theft to which Judah offered himself in exchange. Only after all this did he break down, likely as much feeling guilt for messing with them as well as realizing his previous experiences had led to their being saved.

He showed mercy, but not directly. If anything, he only got there when he heard Judah speak of his father's grief. That flipped a switch, helped him identify with what they'd gone through and not just what had happened to him, so enabled him to not only extend mercy but reconcile with them. And as uncomfortable as it may be to consider, as I read Matthew 15, I see Jesus go through a similar process. We often try to keep him above human emotion or bias. Some scholars excuse his initial refusal to help the Canaanite woman as a test of her faith. But his language was very harsh. Calling her a dog is a slur, made worse when you recall how Matthew earlier in Jesus' genealogy included Gentiles among his female ancestors. Total dis of his family. He did change his attitude but only after she pushed back, flipping the canine image so he could hear what he'd said with her ears. Like Joseph with his brothers, Jesus finally put himself in her shoes. Again it was identifying with her that helped him to have mercy and so he healed her daughter.

It also shifted the trajectory of his ministry, opening it up beyond the children of Israel, most seen after his death and resurrection as the early church spread through the Roman Empire. Which might explain why Matthew included such an unflattering story. He wrote his gospel for a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation, but it was a struggle for many Jewish members to include Gentiles in God's beloved community. Matthew needed them to realize change was possible, necessary even, given how Jesus changed his mind. The chapter is structured to show this. First, Jesus challenged the Pharisees for clinging to externalities like ritual washing, claiming what is most

important is what's in your heart, then hypocritically clung to an externality like ethnicity after "crossing over" into Gentile country. This phrasing is intentional, structuring the story as about change. Thankfully they did change their minds as Jesus had, paving the way for more and more Gentiles to follow Jesus and be welcomed into community. We wouldn't be here otherwise.

And though we're here, striving to follow Jesus, we must admit we can be as judgy as folks in Matthew's community, particularly in this era when so many of us stick with the like-minded, get news from curated sources, stay in our cultural or political silos. I am as bad as any and end up being harsh in my views of "others" as a result. The solution is to step out of our enclaves to meet people, and in the process discover that we share more than we differ. This was pivotal in our denomination in 1988. When General Council 32 began, most people planned to vote no to LGBTQ+ people being welcomed into all aspects of church life, including ministry; but the mood shifted as people shared stories, not just at mics but over meals, at the pub. People realized that the folks they'd judged were barbers, teachers, farmers like them, someone's children, siblings, members of churches. That flipped a switch, made it easier to identify with the experiences of LGBTQ+ folks and people voted yes for inclusion. Or to use a more recent example, a sticking point in Palestinian-Jewish relations in Israel is how segregated the groups are, making it easier to demonize the other. To correct this, there have been groups formed, schools, whole villages even, to bring the communities together. And it works. Studies show that when there is cross-group connection, people have a reduced bias, including a reduced perception of threat. We need more cross-group connections, but how do we get there in a world that feels more divided?

I take inspiration from Etty Hillesum in her conversation with Klaas Smelik. She observed that the only way we will reduce hate and amplify mercy is to turn inwards. She rightly echoed Jesus that we are each the source of hate and fear in the world. Etty had a profound inner life, aware of God as the deepest part of her soul, aware from this of her connection with all others, enemies too even as she lost her life in the Holocaust. It is amazing, and yet isn't, because that kind of awareness is available to all of us. That was my point last week about our shared identity in Christ. Personal aspects like culture, gender, family lineage, are important, but beneath them all is God who in love continually connects us. We need only open our eyes to it and that enables us to show mercy even without putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. We realize that we are already them and they us, through God's presence at the deepest part of our souls. We come to that as we turn inwards. It doesn't matter how. There are many forms of spiritual practice to help us quieten the chatter of the world and the divisions it stokes, and listen to the gentle whisper of God. There our hearts are healed, we learn to show mercy to ourselves and from that to extend it around us, even to "enemies." We don't need to agree with them, but we open space within us to seek understanding.

God's reign is born out of that mercy, a reign we are inspired to seek through the stories that we heard this morning. That reign is born as we nurture our connection to God and each other, the connections from which all mercy flows. So let us seek that mercy, nurture God's reign of love. In our fractured world, we need to follow the mercy-sharing, reconciling way of Jesus more than ever. Amen.