

St James United Church



Message for September 20, 2026

Third Sunday in the Season of Creation
and Welcome Back Sunday

“Called into Community with All of Creation” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16; an excerpt from Charlotte Eriksson, *Everything Changed When I Forgave Myself: Growing Up Is a Wonderful Thing to Do* (Broken Glass Records, 2018).

Today is “Welcome Back Sunday.” It’s called that a bit tongue in cheek because we continue to gather for worship over the summer. But many of us also step away during the warm months for holidays, spend time around the bay, go see family. Which means groups don’t meet; activities like Bible Study are put on pause, everyone takes needed r’n’r. This annual pause and reset is about being in community, as we acknowledge the rhythm of each other’s lives and show care for one another. It’s about being in relationship, and not just focused on our personal needs.

It’s with that lens I read our gospel selection from Matthew as Jesus shares another parable about God’s kin-dom, what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven. That moniker can make us think that Jesus is thinking about the next life but Matthew is Jewish and says heaven as a way to avoid using God’s name. He’s as this world focused as Luke and Mark and this parable found only in Matthew shows how aware of this world he was, spotlighting the plight of day labourers.

Consider how the parable is told. The vineyard owner goes to town multiple times, and each time sees men there hoping to be hired. Unemployment is high in the Roman Empire. Taxes too so people sell their farms to a wealthy elite increasing their estates and turning those plots into vineyards. It is unusual for a wealthy man to do the hiring, but he does, perhaps to make a point, maybe with ill intent to keep workers on edge, a divide and conquer as he takes a few at a time, or benevolently, hiring more than needed because there are so many. We’re left to wonder. Less vague is the reaction of those hired first, grumbling as they get the same as those hired later. An alternate translation of the owner’s response is “is your eye evil that you judge my generosity?” This places focus on the labourer’s judgement, and the way he sees others is found wanting.

His anger is rooted in a belief that the men hired later are less deserving of the pittance agreed to than he was. It wasn’t their fault they weren’t hired. They are all judged as expendable by those doing the hiring, yet he looks down on those hired later, judging them likewise. He’d bought into the system, saw his worth through what he produced, like the Israelites wanting to go back to Egypt where they were valued by how many bricks they made. It seems odd when they all had a right to the basics of living. He could have felt solidarity, grateful they’d eat, but in the zero-sum world of the Roman Empire, just as in the zero-sum world of Egypt, and the zero-sum world of our day, their gain had somehow become his loss.

And that viewpoint, not much different from how we still see others, is why Jesus invites us in the parable to understand that God’s kin-dom is to be structured differently. Jesus didn’t just teach

this. He lived it, calling his disciples into relationship with each other, doing so across social divides, cultural divides, religious divides. He calls us into the same, to learn within community the values of God's kin-dom. It isn't easy as the parable reveals. It takes grace to see the world differently, so he promises to be wherever two or three gather in his name, helping us live into that vision and be a model of a different way of living.

The call to live in community is larger than we can imagine. We easily fall into social divides, but we more easily fall into species divides, seeing ourselves as above other creatures, even seeing the earth as expendable as we look forward to our heavenly reward. Yet God's vision of the kin-dom is now and its community includes the other than human. We encounter this in the Exodus story as we hear how God provided for the Israelites. In the story, the people understandably grumbled. It is a month since they crossed the Reed Sea and the supplies they brought from Egypt are gone. They are hungry, so much so they are willing to sacrifice their freedom. So God responds, or as much to the point, the earth responds, revealing an alternative to the zero-sum of Egypt. The daily gift of manna is intended to help them live in community, cooperating as they gather only what they needed, and no more. In this, the solidarity they are to live extends beyond the human. Taking just enough ensures that no one, and no thing is seen as expendable. Everything is needed and to be cared for. When we live in this way, living more gently on the earth, as Charlotte Eriksson observes, the earth provides.

It's critical that we live in solidarity with each other and the earth. There is intense pressure to do the opposite, pushed by an elite who are divorced from the earth. They aren't looking to heaven for their escape but to space, and see the earth as expendable, all of us too, so they can get there. Living in community with each other and the natural world invites us to look down instead, and see this amazing place we evolved to live on. It offers rules of living echoed in Exodus 16, like not just only using what we need but also living from what the land produces locally. And like only gathering manna six out of seven days, the earth too teaches us to pause, resting each winter so as to bring life again. This invites us to have patience, to look inward to ponder our choices, to trust too that when we choose badly renewal is possible. The earth teaches these lessons and so many more, making me wonder if this is why the Israelites had to live in the wilderness for so long. They learned the cooperative and inclusive way of living they were to live in Canaan. That model didn't last long, prophets needed to call them back. But God didn't give up on them, never gives up on us either. And neither does the earth. Jesus, who joined heaven to earth, came to us, and still walks with us, reminding us of God's way.

Which is why we keep coming together, each year listening to the stories of our faith. They are a reminder to embody the way of God's kin-dom, especially since the pull of empire is so strong. But in these stories, echoed by the scripture of creation, we learn to be in solidarity and not competition, to applaud generosity, not be threatened by it, to cooperate with each other in love, not see everything as zero-sum. We learn such lessons by doing as well as listening -- pitching in, supporting each other, sharing meals, enjoying each other's company, inviting others to join us, not withdrawing from the world but seeking a gentler way of living in it, with all creation. May we do just that this year and in years to come. Amen.