

St James United Church



Message for October 4, 2026 World Communion Sunday

“Living the Sacrament” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; and Matthew 21:33-46.

For close to 90 years, United churches have marked World Communion Sunday, adopting the initiative of Rev. Hugh Thomson Kerr, a US Presbyterian minister who believed that all churches sharing communion on the same day could not only strengthen church unity but be a spiritual witness in a global crisis. First promoted in 1933, his concern was the Great Depression, but I'm sure he worried about fascism in Germany, famine in Ukraine, Japanese imperialism, among other concerns. It was widely adopted in 1940 and with good reason: World War II was in its 2nd year. With the world, our home again in deep crisis, we need this day of spiritual unity.

I say that because there seems to be a repeat of the situation that Jesus challenged in his parable about tenants refusing to give the harvest to the landlord. His aim was the chief priests and elders. They ran the Temple that he cleansed of money changers and merchants the day before, angering them for publicly challenging their authority. But in his mind, they'd picked a side, and it wasn't the people, not the poor anyway. Given authority by Rome, they chose the power and wealth possible by allying with empire. Jesus believed they could have chosen otherwise, producing the fruit of Gods kin-dom.

His teaching wasn't even a new law, but simply a call to live the caring and cooperative ethics of Torah, especially the ten sayings. Let's consider how those sayings begin: “I am the Lord your God who led you out of enslavement in Egypt.” That is the first saying, not a preamble. The other nine are to be read through that lens of liberation: we worship God by not placing powers like that of Rome before God; honour the covenant by treating others justly; uphold life; are faithful to our promises; don't defraud, including not having systems where people can't afford the necessities of life, which in that time included temple sacrifices; help others, making sure they're not so in debt they have to sell themselves as slaves (part of the command against stealing). The chief priests and other leaders built a religious system that for Jesus didn't serve the people. That's why he boldly told them that God's kingdom would be given to others. In this I must underline Jesus didn't mean the Jewish people. His challenge was to those who used religion as a way to gain privilege. That has been a repeated temptation across the centuries.

I see these dynamics today as powerful people use religious language to strengthen their control. And they have allies in some churches who see this as a way to return to a version of our faith where men are men, women are subservient and racial “minorities” among others know their place. I'm thinking of Christian Nationalism. It's the cross wrapped in a flag and there was a

version of it in Germany in the lead up to World War II. This time around folks are online quoting scripture, generally out of context, like saying Acts 17, where God is said to have made distinct nations, is reason for an ethnostate, or Genesis 1 in which God gives humans dominion over the earth is proof that all spheres of life, including politics, are to be under biblical law, or quoting Titus 2 to say women are to submit to men and stay home.

Again, those who promote these ideas are like the chief priests using religion to get ahead. And the impact extends beyond those using such language. Most of us don't spout the religious rhetoric resulting in residential schools, but the assumptions are there as denialists like Second Sons go to Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc just before Orange Shirt Day. Likewise, the men accused of a gang sexual assault at Cornell University may not have quoted bible verses, but their texts betray their belief that women are created for men and are not independent in their own right. Ironically, the purpose of Genesis 1:27, a verse used to justify gender hierarchy, along with anti-trans policy, is about equality, women, as well as men, and every gender in between, made in God's image. That an empowering verse is used to mean its opposite leaves me heartsick.

So, what are we to do? I go back to my statement about World Communion Sunday, us needing such a day given the world right now. We need it because sharing communion is an act of resistance to the kind of world that Christian Nationalists and others want, a way to tend our home. This sacred meal embodies not just the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples but every meal: like the first time he was challenged by religious leaders, criticized for eating with people that they deemed outside of God's grace; or when he accepted the gift of a few loaves and fish from a child and turned it into a sign that there is enough food for all of us to share; or the meals after Jesus' death when they experienced him with them, lifting their fear, and through the Spirit's prompting opened his Beloved Community more broadly than even he imagined, so much so that Paul could proclaim that in Christ there is no Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ. We honour that in communion and are spiritually fed to live all it means, live what Jesus said and did, taking to heart the caring and cooperative ethics of Torah, intended for us to liberate one another in love, not to exert control.

And so from here as we are spiritually fed, we go into the world to live out the spiritual unity of this meal in real ways. We don't need to do this in overtly churchy ways. We live it as we raise funds for cancer research, push for clean drinking water in Indigenous communities, or simply plant a tree. We embody Jesus' liberating love as we stop to talk to someone without a home, stand up for religious neutrality in the public sphere or question why a victim of sexual assault isn't believed. We live a caring, cooperative ethic as we comfort a grandchild, have coffee with a newcomer to Canada, or see and treat our marriage partner as an equal. When we're caring for others, for creation too, we're honouring God and living God's kin-dom, bearing the fruit that Jesus called his disciples, and challenged the leaders, to harvest. Friends, the world may be in crisis, but we aren't powerless in the face of that. Jesus is with us as we share this sacred meal, with us too as we go to live the unity and love it embodies. Amen.