

St James United Church

Message for June 5, 2022

Pentecost Sunday

“Commissioned to Community”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 14:6-17; Acts 2:1-17



A few years ago, Glen and I went to a conference in San Francisco. Sunday was free time so while Glen went off to visit a redwood forest, I attended worship at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, known as the dancing church. It is called that because it's their practice to move from where they sit for the preaching portion of the service into an adjoining space where everyone stands around the table for communion. The "dance" is how they did that. After the sermon, everyone is invited to stand. You place a hand on the shoulder of who is beside us, the person on the other side of you does the same, then you move slowly, rhythmically, "dancing" as one body in a spiral until everyone is around the table. It was a beautiful experience, made even more so because on the ceiling was a large painting of ninety saints, both official and unofficial, with Jesus, leading them in the same dance around the worship space.

That visual is what sprung to mind as I pondered this morning's readings, especially from Acts. It too is set in two spaces. In the first, the disciples prayerfully wait in the upper room. Then a sound like a wind both fills the space and fills them with the grace of the Spirit, moving them into the second, the street where they share the gospel. It's an amazing story, especially because the people who gather come from different places, speak different language, yet all understand each other. We skipped the list of locations to make it easier to read but I encourage you to read Acts 2:9-11 with a map of the ancient world. What you'll notice is that the list includes places in the Roman Empire, and those outside it, some far afield. Notable too is that places like Egypt and Mesopotamia, were once enemies of Israel. The disciples' sharing not only cuts across cultural differences, but it heals old grievances as well, enabling the crowd to become a community.

This is imaged at St. Gregory's. The saints in the mural are from diverse places, different races, backgrounds, religions, but dance as one. Some represent marginalized groups, like Sergius and Bacchus, a martyred same-gender couple from 4th century Rome. Others sought spiritual connection like 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila or advocated for justice like 19th century abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth. Even "enemies" are dancing together, Queen Elizabeth I, under whom British colonialism began and Mohandas Gandhi, who sought its end. The mural presents a vision of what's possible through the Spirit - no one an outsider, enemies now friends, gathered around one table. We do the same as we celebrate communion, joined as one, with Jesus who is in the Father and the Father in him.

As I shared last week, the church is to be leaven, facilitating this communal vision by the way we treat each other and so encourage others to go and do the same. We have done this over our 60 plus years, but it hasn't always come easily, especially as we look to the next 60 and not everyone is in agreement on how best to move forward. Equally, this week the United Church marks 97 years since union, but we aren't always on the same page regarding our future priorities as a denomination. What are we to do?

In Acts, everyone speaking was Galilean, but people heard them in their languages. That says two things to me. First, that being understood is key. We read how this works when Paul is in Athens and refers to their temple to an unknown god as a starting point in his preaching. He noticed this temple because he was willing to learn from the Athenians, rather than impose his view on them. This is seen when a translator uses dynamic equivalence, uses a word or idiom that expresses the concept you want to share rather than a word for word rendering. We see this in what the missionaries to Greenland did when they translated the Lord's Prayer as "give us this day our daily seal". You only know to do this if you are open to who you are speaking with, have learned from them, because love them.

This brings me to my second point. Not only were the disciples open, but so were those listening to them. When preparing couples for marriage I share how they need to truly listen to each other, especially when they have a disagreement. Sadly, many of us don't, forgetting that when we love someone, nurturing the relationship is more important than scoring points. Often, we only listen enough to think of counterarguments, to win the argument rather than for what we share. A faith community is a family and so called to put the same principles into practice, always with a desire to learn from one another and in the process come to a shared vision that honours more than just one viewpoint. When we do this, we model an alternative to the division we see in the world, live what community means in the love, openness and compassion at the heart of Jesus' teaching.

We're sent out to embody this in our lives. Jesus said the Father will send a Companion to us. That Companion in turn sends us to the world. This is powerfully expressed at St. Gregory's, their baptismal font set in neither the preaching nor communion space but outside in a courtyard, positioned to send people into the world just like the disciples in Acts 2. That's what we celebrated as Keegan, Quentin and Griffin affirmed their baptism and we prayed over them for the gift of the Spirit. We think of baptism in terms of belonging, but it is also a sacrament of commissioning as we take on Jesus' identity, bearing his open-hearted and open-minded presence in the world.

Friends, I pray that we do just that, take the experience of love, openness, understanding we find within these walls, and with the Spirit dance it out into our neighbourhoods, playgrounds, schools and workplaces. We are commissioned to be community, and Jesus is leading the way. Amen.