

# St James United Church

Message for July 17, 2022

Pride Sunday



“The Power of Welcome”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 18:1-10a; Luke 10:38-42; “In the Name” by Pádraig Ó Tuama

“Welcome”. It’s a powerful word. It tells someone that they belong, that they have a place in your heart. It’s even more powerful when followed up with action, something Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have turned into an art form. Consider this story in a recent edition of the “Downhome” magazine. A couple of tourists, upon seeing a good number of cars with out-of-province license plates parked outside a house, assume it is a B & B. They knock on the door and the homeowner welcomes them in, and offers them cups of tea and a bite to eat. After a while, they make note of the cars and ask if there’s a vacancy. Their hostess laughs. “Oh no, my duckies, those are my children’s cars. They’re all home for a visit!”

That kind of welcome to strangers on your doorstep isn’t common in Canada other than here. Yet as we listen to Genesis and Luke, in a biblical context setting the table for unexpected guests was what you did. When three strangers showed up, Abraham went all out, not just offering water for them to refresh themselves but presenting them a veritable feast. And because he pulled out all the stops, the next part of the story from what was read today is more striking. The strangers, angels in disguise, went on to Sodom where they received not hospitality but residents demanding that Lot send them out of his house so they could have their way with them. Many of us were told that Sodom was destroyed because the people engaged in same-sex relations. But the rest of the bible doesn’t bear out this interpretation, prophets making clear that Sodom was guilty of injustice. As still happens in war, the residents of Sodom were using rape to humiliate their “enemy”. In the Mishnah, rabbis tell how the people were so unwilling to welcome outsiders and share their bounty that helping some-one in need was punishable by death. Some say it was Lot’s daughter’s cries for justice as she was burned at the stake for helping a beggar that prompted the angels to investigate.

Abraham in contrast understood the virtue of being open to others, a theme echoed in the gospel reading. But unlike Genesis 18 and 19 which are best interpreted based on considerations of status or ethnicity rather than sexuality, Luke 10 needs an understanding of gender roles in Jesus’ time to make sense of it. Like the account of Abraham and the strangers, the story is rooted in a moment of hospitality. Martha did what was expected of her, preparing a meal for her guests and expected her sister to be in the kitchen with her. But Mary took on the male role, and then made matters worse by sitting at Jesus’ feet like a disciple, something only men were allowed to be. A distraught Martha asked Jesus to challenge Mary, perhaps for breaking gender norms, but Jesus didn’t play along, the ever accepting and open

Jesus instead commending Mary for following her heart. I suspect that is why he said she took the better part, not that she'd chosen the male role.

This is where welcome is truly powerful, when we welcome people as they follow their hearts, open to them in the fullness of who they are. When we do this as a church, which we proclaim as an Affirming Ministry, we're church at its best, no one a stranger even when we don't know each other, because we accept each other, create space for everyone to be their most authentic, and let others know in our love for them that they're more so loved by God, loved not just in their hopes but their hopes, loved in their uncertainties and questions as much as in their confidence and creedal assertions, loved in the many situations that life brings as shared by Pádraig Ó Tuama, a truth we affirm in the claim Jesus is fully human and fully divine, sanctifying all that we are in flesh as well as in spirit.

Despite that, we can go through life feeling unsure if we can reveal our fullest selves, so much so that in many ways we don't welcome ourselves even as we welcome others. Pressured by the world's Marthas, we often feel a need to conform and end up pushing away the parts of us we feel others will reject. I did that for a long time, internalising an inner critic, a voice telling me I was stupid, an impostor, a sinner to follow my heart, first in accepting my sexuality, and then leaving the celibate life to be with Glen. We all have those judging voices, but they are lying. We need to listen to a truer voice at our centre. This is what Abraham did as he welcomed the angels. He met with God. As we too sit with God in prayer, we discover God at our heart, loving all that we are, weaknesses and ongoing compulsions alongside strengths and places where we've experienced healing. As we welcome God, we in turn welcome our whole selves, even those places where we still might feel shame.

And even though for many of us church has not been a place where we have felt encouraged to fully accept ourselves, especially those of us who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, non-binary or bisexual, I believe church can be a place of both internal and external welcome, a place where we encourage people to discover how fully God loves them, their authentic self, at their core, and a place where that inner awareness enables us to see the same holy love at the core of everyone who walks through the door. From a place of shared welcome, we can accept differences not as threats but gifts. We can share about our experiences, can dialogue like Abraham negotiating with God to save Sodom. Church is a place for conversation as much as contemplation, where we welcome new ideas, not just defend old ones. In this way, welcome transforms us. In the safety of knowing we belong, we let down our guard and really listen, feel empowered to see the world from another person's view, of course in terms of their status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, identity, but also in terms of their spirituality, theology, even politics and the like. It is a gift that we extend beyond these walls, going out to live in the community the welcome we've experienced, to let everyone know how they are loved, even if they're strangers knocking on our door under the mistaken belief that we're running a B & B.

Friends, when we do this, we live into all that Jesus taught, we take on his spirit, his mission of loving welcome. May we live this welcome within us, between us, and beyond us, and as we do, not just on this Pride Sunday but every day, we are transforming the world in the power of God's welcoming and inclusive love. Amen.