

# *St James United Church*



## Message for June 9, 2024 Third Sunday after Pentecost

“United and Uniting” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Samuel 8:4-20; Mark 3:20-35 and “The House of Belonging” by David Whyte

Over the last two days, delegates from United Church pastoral charges from across our province came together on the MUN campus, most there right now as they gather for the Celebration of Ministries service during which Susan Sheppard, among others, is ordained. It was a really great meeting, the first in person rather than online in five years. The best part was just being together, sharing a meal, a coffee, a laugh, a story, a moment of frustration, getting to know people I've only ever met on a computer screen. It's been a celebration of connection, of shared purpose, of belonging and being united together, made extra special as tomorrow begins a year of commemorating as a denomination that we turn 100 years old on June 10, 2025.

On that day in 1925, delegates from the founding denominations came in carrying banners on behalf of the Methodist Church, the Union of Congregational Churches, the 70% of Presbyterian Churches that voted for union, the General Council of Union Churches, up to that point separate bodies with diverse views, traditions and histories. At the end of the service, they were no longer separate but united as one denomination. Many people thought we were out of our minds, a cross denominational union never having been tried before, but it's worked despite the naysayers.

And the same is true of the first gatherings of a diverse group of people with Jesus more than two thousand years ago. They thought he was out of his mind too, his mom and siblings coming to take him home as the religious scribes accused him of colluding with demons. It was a terrible accusation, especially given the good that he was doing. But he was doing something unheard of, unthinkable at the time, something that his accusers considered to be completely irreligious – he was drawing people together across traditional segregation lines. There they were, men and women, fishers and townies, Judeans and Galileans, someone working for the Romans alongside someone fighting against them, all as one body.

It looked wrong to those raised believing that you stayed pure and holy by keeping disparate things apart, two kinds of thread and different types of seeds, let alone such diverse people. And that was just the religious view. It was nonsense in the Greco-Roman world too. Differing classes of people were to stick to their social tier. The whole economic system worked by people seeking favours from those above them, granting them to those below. That's how you got ahead, and maintained power in the bargain. This may be another reason why at least his family thought he had lost his mind, not using his popularity to social and economic advantage. They and everyone else had bought into the values of their time, not questioning that those values may not be God's.

We hear something similar at play in our First Testament reading when the people approached Samuel and asked for a king to rule over them. Why they thought a king would be less prone to corruption than their recent experience with Eli's sons, then Samuel's, we'll never know, but they wanted to be like the nations around them. They failed to see that God was calling them to be an example of a different kind of community, with God as their ruler so that none of them would be over others, like what Jesus would model in his ministry, everyone united and sharing together. And for a time in the early church the disciples of Jesus lived this out, but like what happened in 1 Samuel, Christians too were influenced by their neighbours, first stepping away from women's leadership, then affirming hierarchies, condemning nature-centred wisdom as witchcraft, waging war against "infidels", declaring non-Christian lands as empty and so promoting the displacement of Indigenous peoples, using theology to justify chattel slavery, taking bible verses out of context to shame gay and trans people, as well as people with disabilities, each a giving in to cultural pressure, not the other way around as is sometimes said, and so stepping away from the accepting, boundary crossing, bridge building, status levelling community that Jesus not only formed but gave his life to ensure that his vision lived on.

Thankfully he didn't give up on us, through the Spirit calling us back to God's vision, just as the Spirit called his ancestors back to God's vision as well, to the way of compassionate justice and unifying love that lifts us up and affirms our goodness, that helps us love ourselves so that we can in turn extend that same love to others, that recognizes that there is always more that unites us than divides us if we would only see as God sees, a vision of others that when lived out makes us his mother and siblings because when we see each other that way we see that we are a family.

Being a family doesn't mean we always get along. In those moments we may want to focus on what is different and make it contentious, like the religious leaders did in Jesus' day. But when we love each other as God loves us, we know that what is important is all the things that we share. Families celebrate this when they share meals, as we do this morning, as they're doing up the road, as they did 99 years ago in the Mutual Street Arena. On that day we celebrated our differences as we affirmed our unity, knowing we'd only succeed as a cross-denominational, uniting church if we lifted up what made each founding church special. And we've kept trying to do the same more broadly, learning to lift up what others have looked down on, to love all the things that God has always loved, not always right away but with Spirit's help, and so we ordain women, affirm gay and trans people, seek reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, commit to be intercultural and anti-racist, make sure that everyone can share their gifts regardless of their ability, each a way we lean into God's dream for us as a church and as a world, a way for us to be faithful to God's unifying will.

In the end, it's about nurturing a space where everyone feels they're part of the family, building a house where everyone can belong. That's the essence of being a uniting church. We have been doing so for 99 years, coming on to 100. May we live into it for many hundreds more. Amen.