

St James United Church

Message for July 28, 2024
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost



“Affirmed in God’s Family” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

2 Samuel 7:18-29; John 6:1-14 and an excerpt from *God Has A Dream* by Desmond Tutu (Doubleday, p. 22)

You may have heard that this past Sunday St. James and Gower Street United set up a table for “Pride in the Park” as a way to offer our love and support to the LGBTQIA+ community, and in the process do a little promotion. We had some information, a bit of food, and beads and cord left over from the “Out in Faith” service that people could make into bracelets. Along with these, we had an activity that seemed the biggest draw – writing words of affirmation for others and taking a word as well. We seeded it with some that we’d written prior, giving us a few papers left over that are hanging up on the railing. (*Read some.*) I invite you to take one after the service if you wish. Some folks were happy to write a word but unsure about taking one, so I’d ask if I could choose one at random. One person for whom I did that got emotional as they read the paper. “I really needed that,” they said. I’m glad we were there if for no other reason than for that person.

In a sense the table in the park enabled us to reflect to everyone who gathered for “Pride in the Park” the sentiment of the song we sang earlier this morning about showing each other respect, listening to others, extending good vibes, ways by which we can nurture a sense of community with one another. I noted the same in the opening ceremony of the Olympics as it showcased the value of equality as the first games with gender parity, celebrated sorority as they honoured the achievements of women, embodied solidarity with international and national athletes along with the oldest living French Olympian plus Paralympians as torch bearers, showed everyone the unity at the heart of community as different national teams shared boats to go along the Seine. That spirit of unity and community is also what I notice in the opening verses of John, chapter 6. However, you understand the miracle that happened as five thousand people were fed in the wilderness - whether Jesus divinely multiplied an abundance of food, or it was multiplied via people’s hearts as those who had brought food shared with those who could not - what’s key is that they sat down and ate together and as they did not only were their bodies satisfied but their hearts were as well.

As Desmond Tutu reminds us, that’s the true miracle offered by Jesus and then multiplied in the early church. Jesus was born into a very polarized society and yet he affirmed everyone as beloved of God and so these disparate groups came to see each other as siblings. This is what I think people were drawn to when John tells us that they followed Jesus to the wilderness because he healed people who were sick. Unlike now, healing is more than just curing someone of illness but means that people were reconnected to their communities, restored to their families. This is what happens as Jesus distributes food to everyone and they eat together. This

was so meaningful, so affirming, that in the first decades of the church, his followers did the same and lived out that sense of being a family across traditional lines.

But this is not what many of us experience in our world, hence it feeling miraculous for so many divisions to be overcome. Rather than treat each other as siblings, we let divisiveness carry weight, or in an Olympics context let national pride trump the Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship. Respect and friendship weren't exhibited by our Canadian soccer coaches when they sent up a drone to spy on the New Zealand team. Nor did they trust the excellence of our team if they needed to cheat like that. Their behaviour speaks to how easily we let factors other than sorority influence us. The reason? I think we don't trust our own worth, don't feel affirmed, like David wondering why God would bless him and his descendants. "Who am I," he asks, "that you'd uphold me like this?" As a result we often don't affirm others in their worth, knocking each other down more so than building each other up. That's why the words of affirmation at our table in the park meant so much to everyone. And it isn't just an LGBTQIA+ thing. We all need to feel loved.

Sadly too often we don't, relying I wonder on what other people do or say when it needs to start inside us. This highlights a detail in our gospel story as Jesus distributes food to everyone. On one level it suggests a personal connection that makes a sense of community happen, but more than this it suggests a divine one-to-one that sets this in motion. Our reading from 2 Samuel suggests the same, David praying not for himself but focused on God. He understands that the blessing promised doesn't come from him but from grace. This speaks to my own experience. It begins with God whispering words of affirmation, Jesus with me, healing my broken heart, my fear of rejection, my uncertainty. I am pretty sure I'm not the only who feels like this. Others who came to the table felt that for sure. It was important then for us as church to help them feel special, loved as they are. We did that because in grace Christ has touched our hearts and invites us to reach out from that place of healing to be the way that the affirmation God whispers to them is amplified. As RuPaul says at the end of each episode of Drag Race, "If you don't love yourself how on earth can you love anybody else." And Ru is right. From that love, that appreciation of ourselves, we can in turn love others and so nurture the sense of community we need, keep affirming each other, and in the process help the next generation feel more loved than perhaps we did, be less likely to question their worth than we did.

You'd think this wouldn't be the case if seeing each other as siblings had lasted two thousand years. But the church backpedalled from that primary miracle and we let age old divisions resurface. That speaks perhaps to how deep is the doubt in our being loved. But the miracle is still there if we want to tap into it. We may have stopped telling each other that we are loved, but God has never stopped telling us, doing so because God is love, made us in love and for love. It is our role then to amplify God's affirmations of love and as we do, the spirit of unity, the feeling of community that we long for will grow beyond a table in a park once a year, beyond symbolism along the banks of the Seine, beyond this and other spiritual communities, until we see that we are a family in God's grace. Amen.