

St James United Church



Message for August 4, 2024

Emancipation Sunday (11th Sunday after Pentecost)

“From Domination to Liberation” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

2 Samuel 11:1-15; John 6:15-21 and “For My People” by Margaret Walker

As I shared earlier, today we mark Emancipation Sunday, a time to acknowledge how 190 years ago on August 1, the Slavery Abolition Act came into effect across the British Empire. This is an important time for heart-felt reflection because as Glen rightly said to me on Thursday, enslavement may have become illegal in 1834 but it certainly didn't end. And neither did the desire to dominate others that motivated slavery for so long. You only need to watch the news and see reports of ongoing wars and decisions that extend rather than resolve them, or go on social media and see posts that stir up hatred to see how much that desire still has not been tempered over these two centuries.

In fact, the drive to dominate has been a tragic part of the human story for many more centuries than that. We see this in a tale written close to three millennia ago about King David. Traditionally he is lauded as virtuous but one of the gifts of the Jewish Bible is that its writers didn't censor the bad, trusting that we'd learn from the faults of our forebears, even the so-called righteous. As important, the choice not to censor suggests that this sordid tale of domination happened, that David abused his power and, not to mince words, raped Bathsheba. The terror of the tale escalates when she tells him she is pregnant and to cover up his crime he ends up ordering her husband Uriah to be murdered on the battlefield.

And though our gospel reading is about Jesus, that time period isn't any better. The gospel writer alludes to this as he lets us know that the Sea of Galilee also had a Roman name, the Sea of Tiberias. In our reading, Jesus' disciples get caught in a storm as they cross this lake. It's choppy, threatening, chaotic, a reminder of how empire actually is, even as proponents of Roman authority claimed they had brought peace and order. Add to this that our story is set around Passover as the lambs are sacrificed, that the storm comes as the people try to make Jesus a king, and all I see in the storm image is the violence headed for Jesus because those in power fear their dominance is threatened.

As much as we may want to focus on abolition today, both scriptures point to the violence at the heart of the slave trade. Africans were kidnapped in the name of imperial expansion, forced into labour so wealthy, powerful people could accrue more, using King David's tactics - domination, rape, murder - then rationalized their evil by claiming the people they enslaved were subhuman, and so expendable. And as Margaret Walker describes, this didn't end with emancipation. She prays for her people because they continued to be looked down on, were forced to labour for little. And though she wrote her poem in 1937, the situations named tragically still feel current.

But her prayer includes hope for a new earth, filled with people who are truly free, with courage to rise and take control of their own futures. And thankfully her prayer won't go unanswered. As much as there is a dominating part of us, there is also part that is generous and good, that looks not only to our own interest but seeks the good of others. We couldn't honour emancipation today if that wasn't the case. And this is why Jesus came into the world, to help us claim that, to reorient us from the domination systems of the world toward God's way of love and liberation. Liberation is the core of our gospel, all of John 6 drawing on Exodus, the liberation story of the bible. It's set around Passover, in last week's reading Jesus climbed a hill to teach then fed the people like the meal before the Israelites fled Egypt, and today walks on water akin to Moses parting the sea. But unlike the Exodus often read as political liberation, what we need is spiritual, a liberation of the heart that God initiates, a healing in love that transforms how we treat others.

Walker names this in her poem as she prays for "a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching." We need healing because without it we stay locked in cycles of dominating violence. It's what we see in the Middle East. Both Palestinians and Israelis experienced profound trauma in their histories and react out of them. The instability of the other countries in the region in part has its roots in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and a loss of honour as their homelands were carved up by Western powers. Ongoing white supremacy is complex but here too is trauma, or trauma avoidance as people double down on claims of superiority rather than face the evil their ancestors did and how they benefit from it. Fights around gender also shore up power rather than people face the harm they're perpetuating. All of this domination is trauma generated.

But that isn't all that we are. At a more fundamental level, deeper than the hurt and guilt is an impulse of caring and generosity and a desire for a more loving world. I'm convinced of this, seeing it in people once stuck in truly harmful cycles of hurt and harm but becoming people living in hope and a desire to help others. What shifted for them, if I may use terms of the movement that helped them, is that they admitted their lives had become unmanageable and only in giving their lives over to a higher power could they be brought back to sanity. You may recognize this as AA language but it is also Christian. They are talking about grace, and the healing that comes when we stop trying to fix things ourselves. The violence and domination binding our world feels unmanageable and like in substance abuse, the liberation we need from the addiction to dominate others isn't achievable on our own. We need God's help, and not just once but turning our hearts to God again and again, asking them to heal our grief over hurts done to us, to lift our guilt over harms we've done, to remove the grudge-laden hate toward others that may lurk in us. It's hard to admit to these but as long as they go unacknowledged, they fuel that drive to dominate others. In contrast when we're honest with ourselves, through grace, we open space for the deeper part of us to bubble up, the generosity and compassion that needs expressing if we are ever going to live the way of God's liberation.

I pray we do just that on this Emancipation Sunday by opening our hearts to God's healing grace. We may live in a world that seems stuck in patterns of power and domination, but Jesus showed us another way. Through his help and guidance, we can follow God's way of liberation and love. Our ongoing freedom depends on it. Amen.