

St James United Church



Message for August 11, 2024 Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

“A Great Reset” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft
2 Samuel 11:26-12:15; and John 6:25-34

For the last two weeks we've pondered a miracle story in John in which Jesus feeds a crowd an abundance of food, then walks on the water as his disciples row on a rough sea. It is a great story, but in the end is just a prelude to his teaching on the miracle's significance, on his significance as the bread of life come down from heaven, a saying with much that we need to unpack, and we will over the next few weeks. But for now, I want to focus on the beginning of his extended teaching, on the back and forth between the people and Jesus as they push him to perform a sign akin to the manna their ancestors ate in the wilderness.

At first the dialogue feels fraught. Didn't they see that he already gave them what they were looking for, even if only his disciples (and we) know he walked on water like a new Moses parting the sea? I think they see it. Centuries before, the Israelites woke up every day to manna on the ground, their food source for forty years as nomads. Their descendants likely figure that if Jesus is a new Moses it didn't hurt to ask for one more meal.

But here is the problem with their thinking. They understood that this was a new Exodus, but were caught in the trap of seeing their ancestor's liberation more in earthly than spiritual terms, and so limited the impact of the divine gift Jesus was bringing them. This is the mistake they'll make later on when Jesus visits Jerusalem for the last time. There the people will cry “Hosanna”, expecting a saviour, but then turn on him when he doesn't rout the Romans as they'd hoped. Like then, here they are focused on their immediate circumstances. It's understandable given how terrible they are. But in the process they limit who Jesus is for them and so who they can be too.

The difficulty lies in their distance from their ancestors' experience. They've forgotten why they were in the wilderness for so many years eating manna when the journey across the Sinai should only have been a few weeks. No one but Joshua and Caleb from the people originally freed from enslavement in Egypt got to settle in their new homeland. Theologian Ched Myers posits that the reason is the people needed a generational reset or they would bring all their experiences with them, and repeat the same oppressive practices with each other that had been inflicted on them. Instead, God called them to draw on their relationship with God as a parent to elevate how they saw each other, to enable them to be kinder, more compassionate and just with each other.

Our reading from the Tanakh reminds us just how difficult that resetting can be, not just in what we know David did, but in his obliviousness to the purpose of Nathan's story about the man with many sheep who took another man's only lamb. He is in such denial as to the evil of his actions

that he ends up pronouncing a death sentence on himself, with his newborn sadly paying that price. Here too the key is the divine relationship, what he did named as despising God's word. He was so caught up in himself that he forgot God and so how he was to treat those around him.

But that is how it can be for any of us, stuck in ourselves and doing all we can to preserve our self-image, even if it harms others, rather than drawing on who we are to be in God. I'm sure you watched with alarm as just that led to violent anti-immigrant riots in England and Northern Ireland this past week. It was about fear, fear that how they see themselves, how they perceive their country, is under threat. Would that a Nathan could come along to tell them a story and help them see what they are really doing, and that their fear of lost identity is being used against them by people who just want to gain power. The irony is that people were holding signs that Britain is a Christian country when their behaviour showed they don't know who Jesus really is. He came so those who follow him could discover who they are in him, and in seeing that reclaim what the generational reset was to achieve - a kinder, more compassionate, just way of being together.

I am sure that if Jesus was there he would not have been with the people hurling abuse at South Asian Britons as they stood outside their mosque but instead would stand with the ones being targeted. In a sense that is what happened as one of the imams from a mosque in Liverpool crossed the police line to bring food to the anti-immigrant protestors hurling abuse at his congregants. He did it drawing on the teachings of his faith, especially the saying from the prophet Mohammed that a truly strong person is the one who can quell their anger even when it is justified. The imam was rightly angry at the taunts and slurs hurled at his community but rose above them to seek common ground through food sharing and conversation. His identity is grounded in his relationship with God, in who he is as a Muslim. He drew on it to restore peace rather than further enflame tensions.

I hear Jesus inviting us to something similar in the concluding words of our gospel as he tells the people that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never thirst. Again, the teaching is about relationship, something we strengthen when we break bread together. In this I hear Jesus asking us to look to how he lived to see what God wants of us, especially by emulating the meals that he shared. In those gatherings everyone was part of his family. He embodied the purpose of their ancestors eating manna for decades, the aim of a generation with no memory of slavery settling the land, modelling what a kinder, more compassionate, just way of being together looks like. And for a time each month we get to express that as anyone who feels called comes forward to share bread and juice, and in the sharing is part of Jesus' family. Thankfully, we draw on this identity not just in this celebration but beyond it as we go through the week and remember in any unkind, less compassionate, unjust situations of who we are to be.

There is much more to Jesus' teaching which we'll unpack in the next few Sundays but if not, the simple invitation for us to remember who we are in God and so who we are to be with each other would be enough. May we do just that, drawing on God's love in all that we say, in all that we do, in all that we are. Amen.