

# St James United Church

Message for August 25, 2024  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost



“Rising in Time” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 kings 2:10-12 and 3:3-14; John 6:51-58; A saying of Amma Syncletica in the *Apophthegmata*  
(<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/12/04/encouragement-from-the-desert-mothers-in-troubling-times>)

You may recall from last week how I sought insight into the bread image of our gospel by talking to Glen. Kneading was the most crucial bread making step for last week's reflection, but today, I want to reflect on another - letting dough rise, known as proofing. As I shared last week, dough rises because yeast eats starch in the dough with air a by-product of the process. It is kneaded to form gluten strands so the dough can trap the air. But none of this matters if you don't give dough time to rise, about an hour, to be kneaded a second time followed by another hour to rise, this time after shaping the dough into loaves, dinner rolls or whatever the finished bread will be. With mixing, kneading, proofing and baking, the whole process takes about three hours. It's a long process, but anyone who has tasted freshly baked bread knows it's worth the time and toil, and possibly the tears if things don't go quite right.

I hear a similar sentiment in our readings but in terms of spirituality. Most obvious in this is the insight of desert mother Amma Syncletica as she compares growing spiritually to lighting a fire. She says at first you're teary and surrounded by smoke, what I take as a grieving awareness of our sin as compared to God, but as she affirms, divine love grows in our hearts, we become fire. Add on to this the selection from First Kings as Solomon prays not for wealth or long life or vengeance but for wisdom. He likely does this because according to the tradition he was just a teenager when he became king. Now it isn't verifiable, but it makes sense. After all we associate wisdom with age, coming to us through what Amma Syncletica says of spiritual development and what Glen says of baking – we grow in wisdom with tears, toil and plenty of time.

Now this doesn't mean young people can't be wise or that you're wise just because you've lived a long time. I've met wise teens and some quite unwise seniors. But consider what Choctaw leader and Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston writes about the elders in his community in *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage*. He says they're wise as a result of the hardships they faced, their experiences making them strong with important truths to pass on. He writes: “they look ahead to another generation, ...determined that their sacrifices will not have been in vain, that their children's children will not grow up in a world more broken than the one they sought to repair... We follow the elders because they have a passion for the future.” He shares how they are not held to the past but draw on it to help get to a renewed future, and to get there they are a source of strength for those around them in the present. As I consider this, I think of Cree and Métis elders I've met over the years, Jamaican,

Jewish, Palestinian and Newfoundland elders too, all wise for the same reason – over time and with tears they've learned much, grown much, healed much, prayed much, & from that have a well of love, courage, knowledge, compassion and hope from which they draw, which all mixed together I experience as wisdom.

This to me is like Jesus' promise of eternal life to his followers as he speaks about his flesh being true food and his blood true drink. Remember how all of this takes place around the time of Passover, which in John's timeline is when Jesus will die on the cross and then be raised from the dead. For John, Jesus isn't just arrested and killed during Passover. He is the Passover. For John we experience spiritual liberation in Jesus, by being joined to him, especially through his death and resurrection. The desert mothers and fathers lived in the wilderness to gain this connection, one lost when persecution ended. It's no coincidence then that Jesus tells us he will raise up on the last day all who eat and drink of him. It's about rising with him, becoming part of him. This isn't about communion as much as what communion recalls about Jesus. Where it does connect is how in sharing in communion we strengthen the spiritual bond we have in Jesus, a bond first made in baptism. The original idea of baptism as sacrament, and by extension communion, comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, the oath Roman soldiers made to the emperor, to serve him, even to death. It was a twenty-five-year pledge, a lifetime for many. Jesus invites his followers to as much, to be joined to him, to grow in his identity as we share his life and mission, perhaps lose our lives, or as I said last week, as we increasingly die to self-interest as we love and serve others and seek to repair the world for future generations.

But it often takes a lifetime to grow in this shared identity. This is something we can forget as Protestants, focused as we are on grace. The way some people speak you'd think salvation was instantaneous, achieved by praying a prayer and that's the end of that. But salvation is something we affirm not on one day but each of the twenty-some thousand days of a lifetime. Each morning, we open ourselves to God's grace, what Jesus calls eternal life. We do this most in times of challenge, toil, maybe tears. God gives us strength and makes these days times of greatest growth, when we grow most in wisdom. Then each night we reflect, grateful for all that the day brought, again with tears, ask forgiveness for when we didn't share fully our love, courage, knowledge, compassion, and hope, share our wisdom with others. We grow over a lifetime, knowing God lit a divine spark in us but we're to fan the flame. We may not see it, think we're only smoke and sin but those near us see the fire. The Orthodox call it *theosis*, divinization. In his treatise *On Incarnation*, Athanasius says that in Christ God became human so we could become God, so we could participate in God's life. Methodists mean as much when we speak of sanctification, how over our lives we seek to grow ever nearer to God, become more like Jesus who expressed his unity with God in all he did and said. Or to go back to the bread image, as we let the air of the Spirit help us rise in our lives.

It all boils down to this: Jesus wants us to grow in union with him. As I shared last week, we've been taught that God is distant, but in truth God is as near as our breath, joined to us through Christ and loving us into holiness. It may take some tears, perhaps toil, but with time we each rise in God's grace and with wisdom. Amen.