

St James United Church



Message for September 1, 2024 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“From Me to We” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Kings 8:22-43; John 6:56-69; and an excerpt from Steven Charleston, *Ladder to the Light: An Indigenous Elder's Meditations on Hope and Courage* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 134.

Today we come to the end of our exploration of John six. Now over these weeks I've said a lot about bread, how making it relates to us spiritually. But the goal of making bread is having bread, and that has one purpose - to connect us. Now don't get me wrong, bread is food, so it feeds us personally. But as satisfying as it is to eat a piece of fresh bread, it's so much better shared. That for me is the goal of everything I've said this month: how Jesus' feeding the people was a reset of who they were to be; how suffering, like love, can help us let go of self-focus and connect us to God and others; how it takes years of challenges and resets to grow in that. All of that is wonderful, but I believe it's not just for us as individuals but is aimed at who we are together.

Solomon understood this. We hear it in his prayer of dedication for the temple. He began by reminding God about his father and the covenant they shared and how that covenant was given to him. But then he recalled the covenant that God made with the people, and lived out with each other, and then the one made with the land and the people from other nations living on it, and then he prayed for God to bless all the peoples of the earth. His prayer spiralled outward into ever widening circles of relationships, not a prayer focused on “me” but an expanding “we”.

As I shared a month ago, Jesus embodied this prayer as he fed the crowd, reconnecting them to each other. But while you'd think it would have a lasting impact, by the end not only had the Judean leaders walked away but most of his disciples had too, leaving just the twelve affirming him as the Holy One of God. I used to think so many left him because they didn't get his teaching but I now think they left because they did get it, knowing that in him they'd have to do more than pray for an expanding “we” but actually embody all that it meant. And that was too difficult.

And though we may think that it somehow became easier, it continued to be difficult across generations. It's why Paul wrote letters of both challenge and encouragement to the churches he helped to establish, why people established monasteries to try to live out this teaching, but new communities would need to be formed as the earlier ones lost their way, why the Reformation started as people tried to recover Jesus' core teachings. Ironically the Reformation also helped form our world where it feels more difficult to nurture a sense of “we” than ever before.

The reasons for this are a bit tangly but it began with the Reformers' focus on grace and faith in our lives, grace being a gift from God and faith a personal response to that gift, both without the need of a priest as a mediator between us and God when Jesus was that already. It was all

sound biblically, and transformative with a focus on personal prayer, individuals reading the Bible and being fed spiritually. That innovation of the Reformation has been a gift to the wider church, and for a time strengthened church life. But it also planted ideas further developed during the Enlightenment, giving us a modern sense of self, each of us a “me” who defines herself, rather than an earlier view where I only really know who I am through others. Now a modern view is a strength, but we can also see its weakness too in how we’ve become more focused on individual rights than we are on our communal responsibilities, are connected to others through technology but somehow are lonelier than ever right now, and also are very divided from each other, tending to connect with people who reinforce our views rather than with those who may challenge them.

And we see the result in our current church life. We all know people who will say “nature is my church” or “yoga is my church”. I get the sentiment. I find going for a walk spiritually enriching. Being attentive to my body grounds me. Spiritual practices help nurture a relationship with God. That’s a lot of what I’ve spoken of these past few weeks, and it’s why those of us who regularly worship also benefit from personal practices. But it’s not “either-or”. As much as I see myself more clearly as I encounter God in prayer, I also know who I am in connection to others and God loves me through them. It’s a value still emphasized in many cultures, like Bantu who say *ubuntu*, “I am because we are.” And that relationship extends beyond place to time, our relationships including those no longer with us physically but loving us as eternal grandparents. I love how we value individual autonomy in our culture, but we also need others if we are to be fully ourselves.

As I said, our Protestant heritage helped create a focus on individual freedom, a gift from half of who we are as United Church, from Presbyterians and Congregationalists. But to balance this we have a gift from the other half of who we are as a denomination, from Methodism which emerged in the Enlightenment, providentially perhaps as people saw where focus on personal autonomy would take us. A prime value of Methodism is connection. We see it structurally, congregations joined in regional councils, connected to the national church, in turn part of a global federation, and we’re encouraged to join networks of mutual interest and cluster with other congregations. But at its heart, connection is a spiritual value as we encourage each other in the larger mission of fostering the shared life Jesus wanted for us, a greater sense of being “we” and not just “me”.

Perhaps it’s time to reclaim this key part of our heritage if for no other reason than practically we need to be with others to learn how to get along with others, to not just appreciate what we like in them but accept what we may not. A Buddhist abbess once described living in a community like being in a sack of potatoes. At first the potatoes are rough, covered in dirt, but they smooth out as they rub against each other. We gain this in a congregation as we learn to be “we” and help each other nurture “me”. We then apply this in the world, a needed skill if we’re to foster peace.

In the end, it’s all about the prime purpose of bread, coming together into community. It is worth letting go of too much focus on “me” to grow again in a more communal sense of who we are. That’s the core of what Jesus came to bring us, a call to nurture ourselves, of course, but also to grow in community where together we are most fully ourselves, connected in God. Amen.