

St James United Church

Message for September 8, 2024
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost



“Be Doers of the Word” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

James 1:22-27; and Mark 2:1-12.

Each year September feels like a new year even though it's month nine in the calendar. That's certainly the case for parents and children as school starts, for university and college students, and in church, with many congregations treating September as a relaunch as people return from the summer. With this in mind, it felt appropriate for a few weeks to look at readings from the start of Jesus' ministry and see what wisdom they offer to us as we begin a new “ministry year”.

We start by going back to just after Jesus called his first disciples and he was getting a name for himself, so much so that when he returns to Capernaum from his own time away, some people have to make a hole in the roof to get access to him for their friend. What a scene it must have been. I can only imagine the comments as the friends first tried to broach the crowd, told not to cut the queue, they should have come earlier, that sort of thing. It would be in complete contrast to Jesus who looked at the friends of the paralyzed man and seeing their faith told him his sins were forgiven. Ponder that. He saw their faith and so healed their friend. It's so telling, and what I was getting at last week as we reflected on how Jesus invites us to faith not just as individuals but collectively. Our relationship with him is expressed in the relationships that we share, as we make love for others our focus, or as James puts it, are doers and not just hearers of the word.

When you read James you learn what he means by this as he goes on to say true religion is care for widows and orphans. That's not just offering thoughts and prayers as we often hear today, but caring for them in tangible ways. It's why later in his letter he tells his community not to judge one another, to treat everyone who comes to worship with equal care, to feed people in need, and tend the needs of the sick. He understood what it means to profess Jesus as God's Incarnate Word. If God embraces our humanity, then we're to do the same and look after each other's needs. And in that we discover that those needs being met are a way by which we experience God's embrace through Christ.

This is one reason we celebrate communion as a Christian community. It doesn't feel particularly meal-like as a piece of bread and some juice, but in the first decades after Jesus' death, Christians met each other's needs by coming together for meals. They shared food, and with that stories about Jesus. As they did so, they experienced him with them. He fed hearts along with bodies, joining them as companions, as friends in his name. And that's what we still are, not just as we share communion but whenever we worship, and beyond that as we share snacks afterward, host a community tea or a fish dinner, have a potluck and play some board games,

distribute candy at Halloween, in each of these moments deepening our relationship with Christ, and deepening our shared friendship in him.

And when we are friends, like those of the paralyzed man, we do whatever it takes to look after each other, to not just offer thoughts and prayers but to tangibly let each other know we're cared for. It starts simply with getting to know each other, especially as we reach out beyond the circle we know from shared committee work or helping at a tea, or pausing after worship to chat with those sitting near us, and meet someone new. I invite you to make a point this month in reaching out to someone. Invite them out for a coffee, to go for a walk, get to know them. It may even be a person you sit near but don't really know well. Take the opportunity to deepen your relationship. You'll be richer for the experience as Christ gains yet another avenue to reach out to you in love, and to love them through you.

It is about seeing each other, and letting others know that they're seen. And this extends to letting people know they are missed when they aren't here. One really helpful approach in this regard is for us to have pew section leads. These are folks who keep an eye on the rows ahead and behind them, making sure to connect with the people around them, and make note too of when they haven't been around for a bit. When that happens, their task is to let me know, or Susan, the chair of our Worship and Sacraments Committee, so we can check in with them. We are also looking to grow our pastoral visitors team, ideally one on one connections of one visitor to one elder. Again, it is just gaining a friend to call, to visit, to help them know they still belong. I encourage you to consider this, and so be like the friends in the gospel, their relationship making a spiritual impact. And finally, we need to get in the habit of letting the church know if someone's in hospital or perhaps recovering at home, or in other need. Too often someone waits for a call but it doesn't come because their family or friends haven't told us what is going on. I'd gladly go for a visit if I knew of their need.

That said, beyond these formal avenues, we are all called to reach out. Isn't that what friends do? We often think pastoral care is something only ministers can do. That assumption comes from the early days of Methodism when small group leaders were to let the minister know someone was sick or in need of "discipline" so they could visit them. Hence not too many people becoming pastoral visitors. And on the flip side people not experiencing that visit from a pastoral visitor, and certainly not from four or five church friends as a visit from the church. I pray we can shift that assumption and begin to see one another as the church, and in that as Christ too, tending our needs. When we reach out to each other in this way, we help our friends to get back on their feet like the four friends in our gospel did. And more than that, we'll find Jesus is working through us in the relationship we share.

Friends, faith is expressed in friendship, experienced in the relationships we have with God not just individually but collectively. As our congregational namesake well knew, Christ came as the Incarnate Word not just to befriend us but so that we'd be friends of each other. So let's put that into practice in this new ministry year. Let's be doers of the word and not just hearers as we attend to others, as we nurture friendships here and in our world. That's true religion, the way we honour our friendship with God. Amen.