

St James United Church



Message for September 15, 2024 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

“An Expansive Vision” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Romans 10:1-15; and Mark 2:14-17; excerpt from Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 36.

Like last week, today we revisit the start of Jesus’ ministry as we in turn begin a new ministry year. I wasn’t expecting it, but I have to admit this context is helping me see the start of Mark’s gospel in a new way. We usually read these texts just after Epiphany when the emphasis is on revelation, on who Jesus is for us. But as we regroup after the summer as a faith community, my focus is on the friends who gathered around Jesus and what his interactions with them show us.

Like Levi, a tax collector for Imperial Rome and so viewed by most people in his community as a traitor. They looked at him and saw greed, self-interest, no religious scruples because handling foreign coins made him spiritually unclean. Based on that some people may have had pity, but I think most people felt contempt. I suspect that’s what Levi saw in the eyes of the scribes who challenged Jesus for eating with him and his friends. Theirs was a narrow view of the world, their sense of belonging to their group too strong like what we shared earlier in our Learning Together time. But Jesus was different. What Levi saw in Jesus’ eyes when he spoke with him at his tax booth, and greeted his companions when they came to his home, was compassion, curiosity, openness, and a willingness to take him as he was. I think that experience reset something in Levi, in his friends too, helped them to see themselves in a new way, and so others too, helped them withhold judgment and see the possibility of friendship instead, hearts healed in Jesus’ open-hearted acceptance and love.

Perhaps in this they even experienced some of Cole Arthur Riley’s awe for each person they met. Her marvel is rooted I think in the same appreciation for the significance of the incarnation of Christ that I believe, as we pondered last week, undergirded James’ theology. I think he expected members of his community to treat every person the same without regard to status because he understood that Jesus was born into the human condition not to rescue us from it, but to help us embrace it, and that means every iteration of it, each culture, belief, identity, language, different ways to express our human experience. And Paul says as much in his letter to the Romans. He may have been trained as a Pharisee and so like his colleagues in our gospel believed that God gave a special teaching to his people, a way that needed guarding, their community too. But through a profound experience of God’s love through Christ, his view of God and the world expanded, and he could say with conviction that there is no distinction between Jew or Gentile, but God embraces both, in fact holds all people in generous love.

It’s a reminder that the issue has never been how God sees us but how we see each other. Again, it is what we explored in Learning Together, how we may be hardwired for belonging but

can have too much sometimes and so end up excluding who doesn't "fit" our group. If instead we want to emulate Jesus in our gospel, we can take the advice of anthropologist Girish Daswani and recall a time we felt we didn't fit in. Holding on to that feeling helps us be open to others, to see them not as a threat but a possible new friend.

Translated into this faith community, it means being open to, marvelling of even, each person who comes to St. James, be it to worship or for different events or as a part of activities held by groups that are hosted here. If that's the case we're all in the friend making business, not just greeters or ushers saying hello, but each of us introducing ourselves and making connections. Admittedly it can be nerve wracking. You don't want to say the wrong thing, asking "Are you new?" and it turns out they've been coming for years. But it's so much harder for the person who is ignored because we're afraid or nervous. So, building on Daswani's advice, I invite those of you who have been to St. James at least a few times to recall your first time here. Chances are at first you didn't feel like you fit in. But then I hope someone reached out with compassion and openness. Recall what they did. Now replicate it with someone new. And if no one reached out, thank goodness you are still here, but more than that, do what you wish people had done. It's as simple as saying "Hi, I'm James. I don't think we've met." It's okay if they say, "James, we met last week". Don't be embarrassed. Apologize and take the opportunity to go beyond names this time. Get to know them, ask how long they've been coming, what they like to do during the week, focus on them and make it less likely you forget their name because you've made a friend. And when we're friends, we help each other. So along with introducing yourself, why not sit near them, help them find the right hymns, explain where washrooms are, if they have kids explain about our family space, take them there, at the end of worship invite them to fellowship. Even if you aren't planning to go, accompany them there and introduce them to someone. It is all about doing what Jesus did and so expanding who belongs.

And as we learn how to do that here, we learn how to reach out in the community as well and so again to see people in a shop, or at school, at a hockey rink or our local Tim's, as possible new friends, to view them as Jesus did when he saw Levi at his tax booth and made a connection. Among other things at the retreat yesterday, we talked about connecting with our neighbours and coming alongside people in their need. We can only do that effectively if we get to know them and can only do that if we sit down, introduce ourselves, have a conversation. And amazingly, though at first we did it in order to help, in the end it's our lives and our hearts that are expanded for knowing our neighbours.

When we approach others this way, we emulate Jesus. So often we take the scribe's approach, worried about keeping our communities, and hearts, guarded, but Jesus revealed that God's way is the opposite, not narrow but expansive where everyone can experience the gift of belonging. That is why Jesus came into the world, not just embracing the fullness of all it means to be human but inviting us to do the same, open to the marvel of our lives and each other's. May we see each other then as Jesus does, not withdrawing in fear or nervousness, but reaching out with compassion and love, and so expanding our circle of friends, and expanding God's love as well. Amen.