

# St James United Church



## Message for September 22, 2024

Welcome Back Sunday (18th Sunday after Pentecost)

“Deep Community” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 18:1-14; Mark 3:7-12; excerpt from Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World* (New York: Avery, 2024), 53-54.

For the last two weeks, I've focused on community, on the importance of supporting people we know, and reaching out to those we don't, both in church and in our neighbourhood. I hope it's been helpful, especially the tips we considered. Today though, I want to shift gears and move from how we nurture community and instead to consider why. In this it's tempting to give a pat answer and say we do it because it's in the Bible. Now it is, of course, like when we read two weeks ago how some people helped their paralyzed friend see Jesus, last week when we heard Jesus defend why he shared a meal with tax collectors and so called sinners, and today as we hear how Abraham and Sarah welcomed visitors who turned out to be angels, and Jesus helped the people who came to see him from Jewish communities like Jerusalem and Gentile ones like Tyre and Sidon. But that's not satisfying. We need to look deeper, especially at Genesis.

In this we may assume Abraham's response to strangers arriving unannounced was so generous because they were divine, but he didn't know that. His response was rooted in Middle Eastern culture where hospitality was a prime value, still is, and not just toward people you know but strangers too. It's understood as the way you build relationships, welcoming a stranger as if they are a friend being how you create one. There is also a moral duty because refusing welcome to someone travelling in a harsh environment was to condemn them to hardship, possibly death, plus pragmatically you may need hospitality yourself one day. But it goes deeper as we hear God promise Abraham and Sarah they'll have a son. Hospitality ultimately brings God's blessing.

This contrasts with what happens as two of the angels continue on to Sodom where not only are they not welcomed by anyone but Abraham's nephew Lot and his family, but the citizens want to humiliate them through gang rape. In this the crime isn't homosexuality but as shown in Ezekiel a greedy, unjust inhospitality. According to Talmud, citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah hoarded their wealth and actively worked against visitors. Among many tactics, they levied a tax to cross the bridge that was the only access to the cities and doubled it if you swam. One person was caught and beaten, then given a bill for the benefits of bloodletting. Another time a beggar was given marked coins. When merchants refused to serve him and he died, those who “helped” him retrieved their money. Finally, feeding the poor was a capital crime, something Lot's daughter Plottit ignored when she regularly gave a beggar food. According to tradition, her dying cry for justice summoned the angels to visit the cities and discern whether to destroy them.

These tales of Abraham and the citizens of Sodom aren't just about angelic visitors but a caution about how we're to treat each other, especially because, as Rabbi Brous reminds us, everyone is an image of the Holy One. And yet today we lean more toward Sodom's than Abraham's view. Paul Born speaks to this in *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times* where he suggests there are three kinds of community. The most common is shallow community where we have some community in our lives but are mostly detached, too busy to nurture relationships. We see this in how we come home and maybe wave to our neighbours but don't interact much, send a birthday greeting via Facebook rather than call or send a personal email, donate to help children across the world but don't know those down the street, attend an event and feel bonded in the moment but that soon dissipates as we get busy and move to something else. He believes that many of us want something deeper but don't do the work it takes for deeper relationships.

But we still yearn to connect with others and because of that there is another type of community that masquerades as the one we need - fear-based community. It creates solidarity not through the hard work of knowing our neighbour but demonizing them, a sense of connection created as people turn on those who are different from them. We connect to our own "tribe" but disconnect from others, withdrawing into gated communities, claiming we need protection from crime when it was our failure to help others that left them no choice but to break the law. It's community a la Sodom and Gomorrah, evident in anti-immigrant rhetoric, excuses made to extend a war rather than seek peace, plans to cut rather than increase social aid programs. This "community" ends up hurting even those drawn into it, fear taking a physical as well as emotional and spiritual toll.

Fortunately, if we nurture community a la Abraham and Sarah, we end up healthier, happier, and I think holier, as we share stories, meals, our gifts in various roles which we look at today as committees and groups share information about their work, as we spend enough time together that we can laugh aloud at the prospect of having a baby later in life, work together to make a difference in the world. When asked how best to do this, Born says all we need to do is bring chicken soup to our neighbour. It's simple but takes intention because we first have to know our neighbour, know them enough to know they're not vegetarian, well enough not only to know they're ill but to want to help them and they'd accept our help, know too if they like chicken soup when they're sick or prefer pho or ice cream. It takes work but when we taste deeper community, we know we need to encourage it more, and address the roots of shallow and fear-based community. It too takes intentionality but we're not alone. Jesus is working in us as we unite people across lines, not Jerusalem, and Tyre and Sidon perhaps, but in our case east end and west end, or town and bay. As Jesus brought people together they were healed and set free, and through the Spirit we'll know the same as we grow together in love.

Deep community is possible as we practice strategies to get to know others and be a support, but more importantly it grows when we want it to. It is worth it. In deep community we're stronger, more able to handle difficulties, less lonely. And in the end more truly an image of the Holy One, not alone but together, a community in God's love. Amen.