

St James United Church



Message for October 27, 2024

Stewardship Sunday (23rd Sunday after Pentecost)

“The Seriousness of Service” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Romans 12:9-18; Mark 10:32-45; excerpt from Ann Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), selections from 60-65.

I'm often struck by how on the nose Jesus was in his social analysis, speaking about leaders lording it over others. His words aren't surprising since it was common in the Roman Empire for some to be lords or masters and others their *doulos* or slaves. As many as one in three were enslaved and as many formerly so. His was a very stratified world with one class lording it over another which in turn lorded it over the next which lorded it over the next again. And I have to say, as I look at our world, I realize not much has changed, even in countries claiming “Christian” heritage, despite having two thousand years to reflect on Jesus' teaching.

At times it feels like we are stuck, unable to imagine any way of organising ourselves other than a model where power is viewed as something to exert over others, even if the goal is something good. We hear this in James and John as they ask Jesus to sit at his right and at his left, that is, in the positions of authority just under the ruler. They have seen all the good that Jesus has done, so it is unfair to assume they have unsavoury motives. But they believe, despite what Jesus has said about his impending suffering and death, that he's ushering in a political kingdom. Benevolent or not, they are picturing having power over others, proof they just didn't get what Jesus was about.

Even now I wonder if we don't get him, putting off the reshaped world Jesus was calling us into. Consider what he said to James and John about sharing his baptism. He meant the cross, his life given in ransom. This ties into his words about slavery, ransom a price paid to free someone from enslavement. And we were enslaved, still are, in bondage to lording it over others, exerting our power at others' expense. Jesus was inviting them into a baptism unlike John's which was about letting go of past wrongs but the patterns of power that enabled the wrong remained in place. In contrast, Jesus called his disciples to die to those patterns and reshape the world by modelling another way, a way of serving others. It's riskier than we may realize, especially if someone of higher status was the one serving. Jesus' baptism is about imitating him who gave his life to set us free in the present world, but we turned it a la James and John, into a guarantee of our spots in a future heaven.

I think we do this because many of us like the status quo. We like the idea that baptism makes us like Jesus, but we end up turning him into us and not the other way around. Consider his job

as a *tekton*. People picture an artisan furniture maker, but this was more often a heavy labourer, and likely a slave. Did you know there's a theory that Jesus was once enslaved? This is posited by Dr. Mitzi J. Smith from Columbia Theological Seminary, based on Mary's dialogue with the angel Gabriel. She ponders if Mary called herself God's *doule* because of her literal status. It explains Jesus' missing years, there being a law that a child born to an enslaved person was freed when they turned thirty. It explains too why Jesus was executed by crucifixion, which was for political agitators and slaves, and clarifies Philippians 2 that says Jesus emptied himself of his status in God to become a slave.

Now this is a fringe theory, but if he was a freed slave, it makes his social analysis and so his teachings about power that emerge out of it much more real. I'm left less inclined to spiritualize his teachings, like the story just prior to this one, which I preached on at Gower, where Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all he owns and give it to the poor. I've heard preachers say, "he's not talking about money but teaching that we shouldn't let anything impede us from following him," but retelling it that way lets us off the hook about reshaping our economics. The same happens when we reduce his words about being slaves to each other to just being kind. Imagine if we took his words about servitude more literally? Given that he's speaking to all of us as his followers, we'd all serve each other, no one solely above another because as I'm a *doulos* to you, you are in turn a *doulos* to another, and so on. So much for the power over others we're so beholden to in our world. Instead, there'd be a consistent sharing of power that removes hierarchies, a flattened world where we no longer lord it over others. Can you picture it? We only need look to Romans 12 to see what it is in practice as everyone is encouraged to make love their purpose by forgiving each other, lifting each other up as they let go of self-interest, extending hospitality without exclusion, not worrying if someone is lower class, and overall, everyone living in harmony and peace. That's a world I want to live in.

And we can. Jesus' initial statement was about the leaders in his society, but then he pointed to his disciples, letting them know that this reshaped world starts with them, with each of us as we take his call to serve each other seriously. It may not come naturally, certainly not when all around us we see a "lording it over others" way of doing things, but through grace we receive Jesus' spirit, and we learn to die to ourselves for others, letting him take over as more often than not we put their needs before our own. Now we don't do this exclusively, especially in our still not flattened world with people taking advantage of others' kindness. We need to look after ourselves. But we need to start somewhere as well.

As we do, the impact is profound. As Ann Lamott writes, when we start living this way, many times people won't notice, but sometimes they will, even if just subconsciously, and they'll in turn serve another, and so on. As we do, we follow Jesus, live his baptism and shape the world as he taught us, a world not about power and lording it over others but a flattened world that is all about loving service. Amen.