

St James United Church

Message for November 3, 2024

All Saints-Reformation Sunday



“The Way to Unity” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft
Philippians 2:1-13; and Mark 11:27-33.

As much as this is All Saints rolled into Reformation Sunday, I'm sure another event is more on people's minds - the US election, especially with how polarized it's been and may still be no matter the results. As we read in our gospel, polarization isn't just a modern issue. Jesus is in Jerusalem after arriving to fanfare, then cleansing the Temple and his disciples are occupying the sacred site. And then religious leaders try to assert their authority to regain its control, and as we read do so by undermining Jesus' authority. We've seen and heard a lot of that lately with politicians focused on denigrating opponents rather than show why we should trust them. But Jesus rose above that kind of thing.

He preserved his authority but didn't undercut others. And this is what Paul invites us to do - to be of the same mind, the same love, giving way to each other in humility rather than holding back from each other out of conceit. And our model is Christ, who, according to the hymn Paul quotes, didn't cling to his status in God but emptied himself to become human, to even become, as we shared last week, a literal slave, and doing more yet, dying as a slave by being crucified. His is an example of complete, self-less love that if we emulate can transform us and our world.

It starts with the same impulse as in the Reformation, not Luther sharing his 95 theses which ended up creating defensiveness on the part of church officials and so bringing division, but before that when he was studying the Bible and had aha moments he wanted to discuss with others. It starts with a desire to learn and grow, and that's how we become of the same mind, the same love. We don't let go of our individual perspective or identity, but do let go of our attachment to them. It's the opposite of what we see today. We are very attached to our rightness and so have stopped listening to others. But we need to listen if we're going to overcome the polarization that defines our time. Listening doesn't mean we have to agree. We

may not. But we open ourselves to possibly learning something new, even if it's just something new about the person we're listening to. As Luther discovered, when we go in too strongly, without humility, we force them to get defensive. The other person won't listen to us because we've shown we don't really want to listen to them. We remain apart.

It's a sad state of affairs because we aren't really apart, not in the truest sense, but are a part of each other. A significant teaching we celebrate on All Saints Day is the communion of saints, a sharing of relationship in and through God, not just across space but across time. We're connected as community in the past, present and future. A key learning as we grow in holiness, which being a saint means, is discovering we're part of a wider, fuller connectedness in God. The original sin with which we all wrestle is grasping to an ego-driven separateness. It prevents us from being in mutual relationship, from serving one another, again as we shared last week. But Jesus shows us another way, a letting go of that ego self so we can listen, learn, love, live with openness to others and so grow in unity.

Thankfully we can grow, letting go of defensiveness over time. We prepare our hearts to be open to one another in our day to day as we open them up through our being open to God. We do this through prayer and meditation, reading scripture with a desire to discover something new (not just reaffirm something we think we know), walking in nature with a sense we're part of something bigger. And along with these individual practices, we have communal ones too, like communion, a grace given as we share the meal that joins us not just to Christ but to each other.

We need these practices in our world today, ways that open our hearts to others. From there we take the next step and actually seek to be in relationship with each other across party and other arbitrary lines. But it starts with a desire to do so that is nurtured in prayer, encouraged by study, made possible with grace as Spirit helps us follow the path that Christ modelled and let go of ourselves in love. We may believe we're better off in isolated silos from each other but the world that Christ invites us into is one that is open to the deeper unity we share in God. May we nurture that unity not just on this All Saints Sunday, or even on Tuesday, but each and every day. Amen.