

# St James United Church

Message for November 17, 2024

Anniversary Sunday (26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)



“Sixty-six Years of ‘Whole-making’” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Psalm 119:1-16; Mark 12:28-34; excerpt from Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 131.

Today is a day to celebrate, to reflect, to discern. We celebrate 66 years as a community of faith established in this part of St. John's, a community of faith rooted in the ethos and traditions of The United Church of Canada. We celebrate both aspects of who we are. They've shaped us as a community, shaped who we are together and how we embody our shared faith. I've learned this in the last three years, especially in my doctoral studies. In that regard I did a few interviews with folks who attend St. James, including a charter member who recalled the early years, all the enthusiasm as families geared up for the inaugural service at MacPherson Academy, blowing up balloons the night before as phone calls were made to get people into leadership positions, so many more people than expected showing up for that first worship, a sign of the growth to come.

And grow you did, but more than just in numbers. As a United Church congregation, you take the bible seriously, not just as a holy text but as words to inspire action in the world. As I reflect on the history of St. James, I note how you have embodied today's gospel, growing in those first years in love for both God and neighbour. You understood like the scribe that those two loves are entwined into a double commandment. Further, he sums up something we need to keep focused on in this present time, that the worship God asks of us is less about a place to gather in as it is lifting up those around us in love and with care. He intuitively what Jesus was getting at earlier when he said to his disciples that if they had faith they could cast the mountain into the sea. He didn't mean just any mountain but the one upon which the Temple was built, Mount Zion. He was inviting them to disconnect their covenant with God from a particular ritual life, in their case sacrifices, to focus instead on the relationships with others at the heart of that covenant. That is living out Torah, which the psalmist tells us brings blessing. As I shared a few months ago, God's commandments are traditionally believed to have been written on both sides of the tablet at once so that decrees related to our relationship with God are echoed by those focused on how we treat others. They are entwined. We love God best in our love for our neighbours.

Your understanding of this connection is what most struck me both in my interviews and in reading the history of St. James. From the start you didn't just focus on worship or educational ministries but were engaged in your neighbourhood and wider community. In the first decades you helped in the upkeep of Burry Heights camp, led worship at seniors' residences, visited the Waterford, set up a “Wheels to Meals” program with seniors brought to the church for a hot meal, started the “Friendship Group” to offer social activities for senior women in the community, and sponsored

refugees. As years went by you helped found the Single Parents' Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as the Hope Foundation for youth at risk, brought the Go Project youth initiative to the island, began small group ministries as an outreach to our neighbours. And most recently you have welcomed in community groups, providing a needed home for local agencies to reach out in love as you have done for these many years.

That's just a few of your accomplishments, and I don't know about you, but as I look at them, I feel so much pride. You keep living Jesus' ministry in what Ilia Delio describes as being whole-makers, bringing together those who are divided, separated, or left out of the whole and gathering them together in love. It doesn't surprise me. The first members of St. James were a combination of townies from established congregations and baymen who'd moved to St. John's. As another member shared, this enabled you to be a safe space for others who had moved into town, a bit of home for folks as they found their feet in a much different context. You still do this, not with baymen so much, but with others who feel like outsiders. It's why you became an Affirming Ministry, a haven for everyone. You take to heart this fundamental understanding of who Jesus is and why he came.

Now it hasn't always been clear sailing. There have been downs as well as ups, as you know. And we're not as large as we once were. Though this isn't unique to St. James, nor the United Church, this can leave us feeling sad, even fearful, for the future. In this we're tempted to look inwards, turn away from our neighbours despite such a long history of community engagement. When we fall into this, we only express the first half of our long time tag line - "A Community of Friends in Faith". Though it captured a sense of closeness, sometimes a group of friends ends up closed to others. So we need to focus on the faith part of the tag line, keep embodying Jesus' affirmation of a double commandment. Then we stay open to others, both welcoming people in and going out into the wider community to share our love and work for justice in the world. That call in faith is expressed in the new tag line included in the Mission Articulation Plan we voted on last year - "Belong, Grow, Serve". I find it to be a timely addition to how we see ourselves not just now, but as we discern what God needs of us in years to come. We so need an energy of open and supportive community, growth in learning and spirituality, sharing with others with compassion and love as the world increasingly shifts from Jesus' mandate to love God by loving neighbours. I'm glad to be part of a community that made those virtues so foundational to its identity. Being open, accepting, compassionate, whole-makers as we nurture a community where everyone is welcome and enabled to make a difference in the world. is the antidote we need in an age increasingly intent on dividing people from each other.

So on this Anniversary Sunday, let's keep being St. James United Church. Let's hold on to the enthusiasm of our founding 66 years ago. May we not just hold the torch passed on to us by those charter members but pass it on to the next generation as they live out what it means to be more than just a congregation but a community that embodies the faith of Jesus, that takes seriously the call not just to worship God but to really love God, our worship expressed in how we love others, how we welcome others, how we reach out to and serve others, serve our neighbours, our faith moving us to create a new future for all people, for one whole earth community. Amen.