

# St James United Church

Message for January 26, 2025

Third Sunday after Epiphany



“Fulfilled for Everyone” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:22-30; and an excerpt from Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 57-58

If you recall, last week we reflected on Jesus' visit to the synagogue where he read the prophet Isaiah's vision of healing and liberation, of the year of God's favour when debts are forgiven, the enslaved set free, the land set free too. My focus was on the word “today” and him saying that vision is fulfilled for us in this moment, as much as for the ones to whom Jesus spoke. My focus was on us as individuals, atypical for me I admit, my conviction being that Jesus came to bring a collective salvation, a communal liberation. It's still my conviction. Last week was just part 1.

It was only part one because last week's gospel portion was the just the first half of the story, the conclusion of which we just heard, as Jesus' friends and neighbours, moments before speaking well of him, try to push him off a cliff. That strikes me as an overreaction to what he said, so let's look at what's going on. I think Brené Brown's comments hold the key, at least in their inverse. As we heard, she invites us to embrace our imperfections as a source of courage, compassion and connection. She knows how we often feel the opposite, especially when we carry shame in our lives, feel burdened by the judgement of others, judgements that we internalize. We can feel isolated, alone, end up fearful, angry at ourselves, but we can also project these onto others.

And this is what I hear happening in our gospel when Jesus refuses to perform miracles in his hometown. On the surface is a sense of entitlement. I think his fellow Nazarenes assumed they were going to benefit from Jesus' fame, perhaps the village being his home base and they'd get a windfall from all the people coming to their community. It would be great given how much they would have been struggling under the Roman occupation. But that occupation also brought abuse and belittlement. And so, I suspect their reaction comes out of hurt and feelings of shame. They lash out at Jesus because he seems to be taking the “wrong side” when he reminded them how Elijah helped a widow from outside their community, and Elisha healed a man who came to see him from a “foreign land”. In times of stress and uncertainty we tend to be suspicious of “strangers”, believing we can only trust people we know, or at least look like, act like and think like people we know. So, they lashed out at him, even though he wasn't the one who'd done wrong and so deserving of their anger. Does that make sense?

And that reaction is not unique to Jesus' neighbours as we know. How often do we see someone striking out at someone having difficulties, lashing out at people who are “different” especially if they are part of a marginalized community, punching down, as they say, when the source of their grievance is above them? We see a good example of this in the Reconstruction period after the

American Civil War when poor white farmers were convinced by wealthy plantation owners that freed Africans were the source of their problems. And this narrative continues in our world right now, broadened to attacks on women, on trans people, on “illegals”, as if attacking any of these groups will bring down the cost of living despite that issue being a pressing concern for so many.

What is so sad for me in what we are seeing is how much of this punching down is happening by people who claim to follow Jesus. Their version of the gospel stops at part one of this reflection, what I said last week, is about individual healing, personal salvation, with a good dash of non-biblical authoritarianism and judgement of others. It's why there was such a backlash in some circles to the sermon given by Bishop Mariann Budde on Tuesday, when she called on the American president to show mercy to trans people, to undocumented migrants as well, some even trying to claim that empathy is a sin. She offered a broader understanding of Jesus' teaching, his reference to Elijah and Elisha after he proclaimed Isaiah's vision a reminder that God's Reign crosses borders, that the liberation and healing Jesus read about is intended not only for one tribe or people, in fact, it cannot happen if it is for only one tribe or people. There'll always be unrest, some bondage, some dis-ease for us as long as some people are held down by others, none of us truly free until everyone is free.

And that vision is made real when we take seriously Paul's image of the body of Christ. It is an image of solidarity and affirmation, a recognition that all of us are different with unique gifts and abilities, but contribute to the whole. It is a powerful image of the church, inviting us to see how we are spiritually connected through Christ. It also calls us to extend compassion and care to each other, because the whole body functions at its best when all parts are healthy, when every member is enabled to do what they're made for. This too is what Bishop Budde was getting at in her sermon. We are to do this as church but not only for ourselves, modelling what is possible more broadly in society as we lift each other up. Doing so, most especially for any of us who are hurting, or otherwise pushed aside, is the heart of God's Reign.

But that collective liberation we yearn for, in other words God's Reign, the message of the gospel, won't happen until individual hearts are set free. It's one more reason none of us is free until we all are, the world not whole and healthy largely because so many of us are not personally whole or spiritually healthy. Which brings me back to where I started with Brené Brown's advice about embracing imperfections as gifts by which we gain courage, compassion and connection. We do that from a place of respect and care for ourselves, an awareness that we are God's beloved children, valued, on a journey of growth, but worthy as we do so, not only when we get to some perfect version of ourselves. As I shared last week, God is with us in this, animating us, helping us come to this awareness, healing us in grace. And as we extend such an awareness to ourselves, we offer the same to others, in love lifting each other up, and in the process lift up whole communities as well.

So, despite everything we see in our world as so many people seem to punch down rather than lift up, I have hope. God is at work as we work together, lifting us up so we can do the same, bringing healing as we help each other heal, setting our hearts free, inviting us to support each other in this, and in the process setting the whole world free. Thanks be to God. Amen.