

St James United Church



Message for March 30, 2025 Fourth Sunday of Lent

“The Reconciling Cross” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; excerpt from Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), xv-xvi

Over the last few weeks, we have been reflecting on the significance of the cross for our faith, especially considering what it means for us to carry the cross with Jesus. In this we've looked at how in the cross Jesus shows us how God chooses vulnerability over power, sacrifice over self-preservation. We've considered too the threat this was to the powerful as he modelled a way that challenged accepted though unjust social norms, norms that are followed even now. We also pondered how in the cross Jesus accepts the fullness of human experience, including suffering, and so his death was an act of solidarity with every one of us, and invites us to extend the same.

In all this, we've considered the cross from two vantage points: one, what it reveals about God, and two, what it reveals about us. I invite us, now, to bring those vantage points together. Look at a cross here in the sanctuary. What do you notice? What might its shape signify? The first thing I notice is a plus sign. And what is that, if not a sign of more than one thing being joined together. When we consider what we've been reflecting on these weeks, we recognise that at a broader level we've been pondering how the cross joins heaven and earth, and not just God and humans, but all of the spiritual realm with the created, the cross planted in the earth and pointing to the sky, Jesus suspended between these two realms, and in the process joining them together.

Jesus doing this speaks to God's incredible, compassionate love, a love that's never withheld, despite what we keep telling ourselves, but offered from the very centre of who we are whenever we turn inward, turn away from the chatter of the world to the silence of God's heart. This is an ever-providing love, feeding the people of Israel while they wandered in the wilderness, a story when taken less literally speaks to how much we all wander as we seek a spiritual home, as Augustine writes: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new... You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you.” Thankfully God waits for us patiently, like the father in the parable, loving his two sons despite the hurtful request of the younger, and the entitlement of the older, ready to welcome, affirm, hold. In that embrace, as Leonardo Boff tells us, we're known more deeply than we even know ourselves, helping us come to ourselves.

This is a pivotal statement in the parable. The younger son came to himself. I hear it as more than that he realized he'd made a mistake but that he remembered who he was. In recalling how the servants had enough to eat, he recalled the generosity of his father, recalled a love that broke with tradition as he split his estate not just early but equally (not the practice of the time hence the older son's anger), and in this remembered who he was, not alone but connected to others in multiple, and essential ways.

This highlights the horizontal arms of the cross, reaching out to reconnect everything, to restore us all to one another. And so the second thing the shape of the cross reminds me of is the medicine wheel of Indigenous wisdom, the four colours of Anishnabek teaching on our church crest. I was taught about the medicine wheel when I lived on a reserve out West. It is a profound visual image of our need for balance, be it four races, four directions, four elements, four seasons, four stages of life, four parts of a person, and so on. There are multiple aspects to this teaching but at its core is how no one part stands apart from the others, how everything is part of everything else, how everything is connected, is related.

This reminds me that in Christ who gives everything of himself to overcome the barriers we set up between each other, I not only come back to myself in God, but want to, need to, come back to others. We see this in our gospel as the father speaks to the older son. Having the younger son back means nothing if there is a rift between the two brothers. The same applies to us. Knowing God's love is a dead end if it doesn't lead us to let go of grudges, to extend forgiveness, to seek forgiveness too.

I had a powerful experience of this in my life. I participated in "Returning to Spirit", a program that brought together survivors of Indian Residential Schools and church leaders as a way to help survivors to heal. As part of this, we were instructed to spend time in prayer in order to discern if we were able to reach out to someone who'd hurt us, to tell them how we felt, and so make space to let it go and move on from what had happened. I called a former boyfriend who'd been controlling, emotionally manipulative, abusive really. I let it all out, and to my surprise he apologized, admitted what he had done, which opened a space in me to name where I'd wronged him. I said goodbye feeling lighter, less bound by our past. We would never be friends. But I didn't hate him anymore, felt sorry for him, for all of it, more than anything. It was a very healing experience and one that was only possible because I first felt grounded in God's love.

Experiences like that call are a significant part of our growing spiritually. And we need them more than once, the Greek word in the story suggesting the younger son did not "come to himself" once but was "coming to himself", a process that perhaps began when he first walked away from home. Again and again, God's love reaches out to us and helps us find a new direction, helps us stop wandering in wildernesses of our own making and come home to ourselves, and not just once but multiple times, each time our sense of home feeling a bit more secure, and more able to reach out to seek and to extend forgiveness. From that place, we can imagine more healed relationships, not just in our personal lives but in our communities, in and between nations, across our world. That's why as part of a process to help survivors heal, we church leaders had to do our own healing, opening us to want other's healing. The gospel is more than a personal relationship with Christ. It is about reconciliation between people and the restoration of creation. We need then to be people helping others to heal, trying to overcome biases between groups, working for peace, walking gently upon the earth.

As we do, the cross is ever before us, an invitation to draw near to the God who gives everything for love, who patiently helps all relationships heal, who is the joining of heaven and earth. Amen.