

St James United Church



Message for April 6, 2025 Fifth Sunday of Lent

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

Is. 43:16-21; Jn 12:1-8; James Finley, “Mystical Sobriety” in *Living School Alumni Quarterly*, Issue 3 (Fall 2019)

The last few weeks, we’ve been following the cross, and today it casts an inescapable shadow. It casts a shadow because we know that when we meet again it’ll be to remember not only when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph but that he’d later be arrested and crucified. It’s unbearable to think of, so much so that many of us would prefer to skip over Jesus’ death and go straight to his resurrection. We can’t though, any more than Jesus could, especially as off to the side of today’s gospel portion, as Jesus and his disciples share a meal, the priestly council meet to discuss the threat that he has become to the nation’s safety and decide that one man should die in order to save them all.

Their words sum up what we have been reflecting on these weeks, highlighting the cross not as an end but a beginning, not just an instrument of death but a tree offering a way into new life. Paul says as much in Philippians 3 when he writes of how he wants to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection ... by becoming like him in his death.” This is not a literal death wish but a recognition as James Finley suggests that in the cross Jesus models a way of liberation that brings us into relationship with the one who loves us fully and takes us to themselves, or as Isaiah writes: God promises to bring water to the desert so the people can return home and know themselves as God’s beloved.

We hear this life-focus in our gospel even though the backdrop of it is death, first Lazarus’ as he who had been revived from death by Jesus reclines with him at table, then Jesus’ as he interprets Mary’s act of gratitude for that revival as preparation for his burial, and even the anointing like a death, the jar not resealed but broken and nard poured out. Yet the story isn’t about grief. Instead, the stench of Lazarus’ tomb is replaced with the heady scent of perfume, making it about celebration, connection, loving service.

At the centre of the story is a conflict between Judas and Mary, albeit through Jesus. Mary is open-hearted, joyful, unable to contain her gratitude and so hosts a meal, a sign of her desire to be in relationship not just with Jesus but the other disciples. It’s six days before the Passover, so this meal carries the energy of that festival, which along with themes of freedom and justice, is associated with welcoming the stranger and taking care of the vulnerable. Mary is committed to this event as it means being willing to give away everything for others. The cost of the nard is equivalent to a year’s wages, suggesting she’s even willing to sacrifice her life in love. In this she has taken to heart the way of Jesus, prefiguring his washing of his disciples’ feet on the night before his death, often viewed as a symbol of that sacrifice. In all this Mary is full of life and love.

In contrast, Judas is angry, claiming to be upset because the money for the nard could have been used to help the poor, but as the author tells us, he kept the common purse and would take some of the proceeds for himself. And so despite his protest, he comes across as stingy when compared to Mary who is so extravagant she needs to mop the excess oil with her hair. That too may have been a flashpoint, Mary's actions suggesting a degree of intimacy that Judas considers inappropriate for the occasion. "Shouldn't she be waiting on everyone like her sister," he thinks? In this Judas comes across as wound up, more focused on rules, on purity, unable to let go in love and a desire for a relationship with Jesus, and so a relationship with God, shown not just by Mary but Lazarus too as he reclines with Jesus as the beloved disciple will when they share a meal before Jesus' arrest.

As I consider the conflict, I am faced with how much I can be Judas as much as I want to be Mary, standing apart, unwilling to embrace the path of the cross, unable to die to my way of doing things even though I sacrifice deeper union with Jesus. As Finley writes, we're addicted to an illusion of separation and a myth of self-sufficiency. It's likely why Judas stole from the common purse, telling himself that everyone needs to look after himself. The root of his action was a lack of trust in his companions, in Jesus, in God to provide. The distrust is like being in exile from ourselves as much as from others. And as we convince ourselves we are on our own, especially that we are separated from God, we feel driven to make things right with God, follow the rules, live purely. As we discover in Judas going on to betray Jesus, this constant sense of alienation is a spiritual dead end.

The solution is the cross, but not as proof that we're separate from God, rather as a mystery that frees us from the illusion that we are isolated selves. A key way to be released from this illusion is prayer. One method is what we practiced last week when we sat in silence, like sitting with our spouse, not needing to say anything. It trains us to unhook ourselves from self-focus as we release our thoughts and turn our hearts back to God. Because it shows how much we get caught up in ourselves, it highlights the need for what I talked about today, an Examen where we honestly recall our day. This is also part of the cross as we die to a sense of personal rightness and God reveals where we can grow. To this end, I'd like to suggest a final practice, the Welcome Prayer. Over the course of our day, things will happen that can bring us down, over which we have no control. Rather than get stuck in anger, we open our hearts to love as we pray, "I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing. I welcome all thoughts, feelings, persons and situations. I let go of my desire for power and control, let go of my desire for affection and approval, let go of my desire for survival and security, let go of my desire to change any situation or person. I open myself to the love and presence of God, and God's healing action within me. Amen." Even a prayerful "Welcome" will do. It is a simple but powerful practice of release, of following the way of the cross that helps us to die to ourselves and live in God. We won't always get it right but the desire to do so is enough.

Friends, in these weeks we have focused on the cross and very soon we will begin Holy Week, a time that invites us to draw even nearer. May we do so unafraid, knowing that the cross is a tree of life, inviting us to let go of ourselves and so to rise in the new life of God's liberating love. Amen.