

Melville United Church

March 29, 2020

Lent 5

We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4 - also known as the Haldimand Tract - was signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and we acknowledge our responsibilities as treaty members.

Sharing the Light *(take a moment to light a candle and centre yourself to prepare to enter in to a time of worship and prayer. As you light the candle repeat the following words)*

I light a candle

in the name of the God who creates life,
in the name of the Christ Presence who loves life,
in the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.

Centering words: Philippians 4:6-7

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Call to Worship:

We come to be in conversation with the holy.
The voice of God speaks to us and through us.
The wisdom of God speaks to us and through us.
The breath of God speaks to us and through us.
So let our hearts be open
to the Holy Presence within us.

Opening Prayer:

Infinite Wisdom, may we come with our hearts, minds, hands, and ears open. Let us find the solid foundation, the rock upon which our faith rests - your unending love. Let us find peace from the fear that surrounds us at this time. Let us find respite from the worries of the day. Let us be still and quiet in this time that we set aside to connect with the spark of your Spirit that dwells within each of us.

Forgive our unfaithfulness. Forgive our want to fall into fear along with so many others. Forgive us when our trust in you wanes. Fill us with the certainty that your love is stronger than our fears, that your love will carry us through, that this, too, will pass. Let us feel your presence with us now. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 7:24-27

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!

Message:

I receive a number of e-mails from a variety of organizations that interest me. One such organization is called Eckhart Teachings. Posted there are messages and course opportunities from the modern day mystic and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle. He has written many books and is in demand as a speaker all over the world on the topic of spiritual presence or the inner life. He suggests that the suffering we experience in our lives is created by our own thought processes which he calls “the mind-induced state of consciousness”. Nothing exists until we give it importance or ‘life’ with our attention, our thoughts or our emotions.

Fear, for example, is a thought process that projects us in to some future moment and that anticipation creates emotion. If we can bring ourselves into the present we will find that in this moment there is nothing to fear. The thing which we anticipate has not happened yet. Tolle says that it is when the ego, personality or thinking part of our selves gets wrapped up in what might or could happen that fear and unhappiness or suffering occur. This moment just is until we ‘think’ something into it.

In a recent teaching video Eckhart Tolle shared the scripture that I read a few moments ago. Although he is not aligned with any particular religion or tradition, he used the Bible in this case to illustrate his point.

That point is that if our lives are built on the solid foundation of our inner, true essence (which I call the God-spark within) then we will be well-equipped to withstand whatever ‘storms’ we encounter externally. But if we have put our faith in the external world and have not done the work of ‘digging deep’ within we will be more likely to succumb to fear and collapse under pressure.

He suggests we view the ‘house’ in this parable as our selves. We are the house and the one doing the building. Are we living our life on the surface or the ‘sand’ of the “mind-induced state of consciousness” or are we living from a deep place of faith and trust, a deeper, more solid foundation of rock?

Adversity comes to us all at some point, both on an individual level and on a corporate level. Right now we are experiencing a large adversity - a global pandemic - which is affecting all of us. We see many who are panicking in fear and running out to the grocery stores to stock up on items that are not even necessary. This heightened sense of anxiety is an indication that many are living on the surface. That their house is built on sand and they feel that all is collapsing about them.

I see this in much the same way as Eckhard Tolle does only I couch my comments in the language of my faith tradition which is Christianity. The one whom we follow, our teacher, Jesus, repeated time and time again the words “Do not be afraid.” And these words were found often in the Hebrew Scriptures long before Jesus’ time.

The basic message of the Bible (and the sacred texts of all major faith traditions) is that a relationship with the Spirit of Life (which we call God) is all that is needed to face and overcome any situation that living in this world will put before us. And that God isn’t found somewhere out there. That God is found right here within our deepest selves.

When Eckhart Tolle talks about ‘presence’ he is talking about the same thing we label God. God just is. God always is. God is part of us. It is the part I often refer to as “Holy Presence”. And we cannot know that Presence with our mind. In fact, as soon as we start to think about Presence we lose touch with it. Although Presence is with us and available to us always, it can only be truly ‘known’ in the present moment. Here and now. So when we are running around

in fear, full of anxiety and worrying about what might happen we can rest assured we are not connecting with Presence or God.

It has been said that we cannot do much about what happens externally. Besides taking precautions and being prepared, or perhaps helping other people we don't have much control over the external world. What we can do something about is what happens within ourselves. What we can do something about is how we react to the external events.

This pandemic is an opportunity. On the surface or with a conventional view it appears to be a very negative event and could be considered an obstacle to humanity, as Tolle puts it. But it is actually an opportunity to "awaken to a higher level of consciousness" - to remember Spirit - or God as we say in church circles. It is an opportunity to be present.

To be in the moment means to be truly present with yourself, with your inner being, right now, right here.

I want to invite you into a very short meditation that I am hoping might demonstrate how to do that. Perhaps it will help you to understand what I am talking about.

Make yourself comfortable as possible where you are right now. Put your feet flat on the floor and let your body relax into your seat. You may want to close your eyes.. Now take a few deep breaths... *Breathe in, breathe out...* And as you do so let yourself feel your body relaxing...*(take 2 or 3 deep more deep breaths)* now bring your attention to your breath... don't think about it, don't change it, just take note of how it feels as it enters your nostrils and flows down into your lungs.... notice the rise and fall of your chest or abdomen as the air comes in and goes out.... Let yourself feel your body relaxing.... Pay attention to what is happening in your body right now... don't think about it...if you find your mind wanting to but in take your attention back to the breath... In and out... Be here, in the present moment... be with your relaxed body, with your breath moving in and out on its own, and know that in this moment you have no problems. In this moment you simply are... remain in this place for a few moments of silence... when you are ready let yourself become aware of your surroundings and open your eyes. So as you once again let yourself become aware of your surroundings and bring your consciousness back to the external world, remember that feeling of presence. And remember that you can do this little exercise at any time you begin to feel anxious or afraid. It is that simple.

This pandemic is an opportunity for us. It is offering the gift of time. Time to dig deeper and strengthen the foundation of Presence. The foundation that will keep us strong and firmly grounded when all the world around us seems to be falling into chaos.

The one who builds on a solid foundation can withstand the storms that come to us all. Adversity, in whatever form, is always an opportunity to go deeper, to find and strengthen that foundation.

Be present to the Presence that is within you and from which you *cannot* be separated. I want to leave you with something to think about. "When ego grieves for what it has lost, the spirit rejoices for what it has found."

God bless you all. Stay home, stay healthy. Amen.

(If you know the tune, I invite you to sing the following hymn. If not just read the words - it seems especially appropriate today.)

Hymn: How Firm a Foundation**VU 660**

- 1 How firm a foundation, you servants of God,
is laid for your faith in God's excellent word!
What more can be said than to you has been said,
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?
- 2 'Fear not, I am with you; O be not dismayed!
For I am your God and will still give you aid;
I'll strengthen and help you, and cause you to stand,
upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.
- 3 'When through the deep waters I call you to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be with you, your troubles to bless,
and sanctify to you your deepest distress.
- 5 'The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not - I will not desert to his foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I'll never - no, never - no, never forsake!'

Offering:

The expenses of the church (staff wages, utilities and upkeep of the building) continue even when worship is not happening. Please consider making a contribution by one of the following methods:

1. *Cheque (or post-dated cheques): made payable to: Melville United Church - which can be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 41 , Fergus, ON N1M 2W7 or put in the mail slot beside the parking lot door.*
2. *Donate online through the Canada Helps web-site*
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/melville-united-church/>
3. *Call Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*
4. *E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to secretary@melvilleunited.com*

Preparation for Prayer: *As we prepare our hearts and minds to enter into a time of prayer I invite you to sit comfortably and quietly for a moment. Breathe deeply a few times paying particular attention to your breath as it moves in through your nostrils and fills your lungs. Picture your breath as a light entering your body and filling it with love and relaxation. Then when you exhale imagine the breath taking all your tensions and worries with it as it leaves your body. Do this a few times until you feel relaxed then move on into the prayer time.*

Prayers: *I have been asked to share the following prayer with Melville folks. Some of you may have already seen it on the United Church of Canada web-site but here it is for those who have not seen it.*

~ A prayer during times of COVID-19 by the Right Rev. Richard Bott, Moderator of the United Church of Canada. Originally posted on Facebook. Moderator Bott encourages the sharing of prayers he posts throughout his term.

In this time of COVID-19, we pray:
 When we aren't sure, God,
 help us be calm;
 when information comes
 from all sides, correct and not,
 help us to discern;
 when fear makes it hard to breathe,
 and anxiety seems to be the order of the day,
 slow us down, God;
 help us to reach out with our hearts,
 when we can't touch with our hands;
 help us to be socially connected,
 when we have to be socially distant;
 help us to love as perfectly as we can,
 knowing that "perfect love casts out all fear."
 For the doctors, we pray,
 for the nurses, we pray,
 for the technicians and the janitors and the
 aides and the care-givers, we pray,
 for the researchers and theorists,
 the epidemiologists and investigators,
 for those who are sick,
 and those who are grieving, we pray,
 for all who are affected,
 all around the world...
 we pray
 for safety,
 for health,
 for wholeness.
 May we feed the hungry,
 give drink to the thirsty,
 clothe the naked and house those without homes;
 may we walk with those who feel they are alone,
 and may we do all that we can to heal the sick-
 in spite of the epidemic,
 in spite of the fear.
 Help us, O God,
 that we might help each other.
 In the love of the Creator,
 in the name of the Healer,
 in the life of the Holy Spirit that is in all and with all,
 we pray. May it be so.

Our prayers continue as we pray for our brothers and sisters of St. Andrew's United Church, Bayfield and for all those who work on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world.

We pray today especially for Diane Maloney's husband Bill. These are difficult times for everyone but especially for those who need to be in hospital as even their families are not allowed to visit or to be there with them. And we pray for David Lamb as he recuperates at

home. May they feel our prayers surrounding and holding them in love.

And we take a moment now to offer our own individual prayers. We all need strength and patience and compassion at this time. Compassion for others and for ourselves. Hear the prayers of our hearts, dear God,... *(offer your individual prayers)*

Holy Presence, we cannot be separated from you. Your love is with us always. May we remember that as we go deep to find the firm foundation that will sustain through this difficult time. You are the rock upon which we stand. With you at our centre we can withstand any storm, even a Covid-19 pandemic..

We offer these and all of our prayers in the name of our brother Jesus the Christ who stands with us as we repeat the words that he taught us...

Lord's Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name,
 thy kindom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth, as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil:
 For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
 forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing:

We cried to God from the depths
 and God heard our voice.
 We came with our burdens, bound by our fears,
 and God took them from us.
 Go on with hope.
 Go in the strength of God who shows steadfast love,
 in the courage of the Christ who shares our humanity,
 and in the companionship of the Spirit who gives life. Amen.

Prayer of the Week:

Holy Presence, we listen for your voice. Speak to us of hope and new life as we shelter in place at this challenging time. Calm our fears and remind us that your presence is the firm foundation we need to stand on in order to weather the storms of life. Remind us that we are never alone. Amen.