



May 17, 2020

Melville United Church

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Melville United Church
May 17, 2020
6th Sunday of Easter

Worship prepared today by
Rev. Marion Loree

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.

Welcome

My name is Marion Loree and I am the minister at Melville United Church in Fergus, Ontario. We gather in community. Even though we cannot be together physically, we share in the community of faith through things like this - printed or videoed worship. This service is prepared for Sunday May 17, 2020.

This week I want to talk to you a bit about what it means when we hear the words 'to be saved'. It is an expression that has become a standard for many Christian denominations. It seems to imply that one is lacking if one is not 'saved'. But I want to try to put a different slant on the phrase.

So, I invite you to join me in a time of worship, a time in which we search together for hope and meaning and ways to strengthen our faith. A time for recognizing and acknowledging the still small voice within each of our hearts.

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.

The centering words today are taken from a little book called "Fragments of Your Ancient Name" written by Joyce Rupp. She draws wisdom from many traditions and presents for each day of the year, a name by which God is known around the world. She dedicates her book with the words "To the One encompassing all names and no names singing in my soul since the beginning." The name I chose to use today is 'Door' and is inspired by John 10:7.

Centering words:

You are the Door to love,
To freedom, to belonging.
You are the Door to change,
To growth, to wholeness.
You greet us, arms wide open,
Welcoming us with joy.
You invite us to step inside,
To trust what awaits us
When we accept your invitation
To be all that we can be.

Call to Worship:

Come into this time as you are:
come as friend or stranger;
come as seeker or teacher;
come as old or young,
come as lost or found,
come as you are.

You are the person God loves
come as you are to worship,
and be folded into God's love.

Hymn: And on This Path**MV 8**

And on this path, the gates of holiness are open wide,
and on this path, the gates of holiness are open wide,
and on this path, the gates of holiness are open wide!
Open wide! Open wide! Open wide!
The gates are open wide!

So enter in, the gates of holiness are open wide,
so enter in, the gates of holiness are open wide,
so enter in, the gates of holiness are open wide,
Open wide! Open wide! Open wide!
The gates are open wide!

Opening Prayer:

God, you are within and beyond each one of us. You are the God of all Creation. Out of your being all things are made, yet in all things your being cannot be contained. Help us to see you within all things, within all people. Help us to know that you are beyond our understanding, beyond our imagining, but as close as our breath. Amen.

Message: Reflections on Being 'Saved'

So for the message time today I am doing things a bit differently. I am using three different scriptures and I will intersperse them with some commentary. The title is "Reflections on Being 'Saved'."

What does it mean to be 'saved' in religious terms? What do you think of when you hear the phrase "are you saved?" How do you respond to a question like that? My response is often another question - "Saved from what?"

You may have your own idea of what it means to say one is 'saved' and there is the traditional idea that Jesus 'saved' us by dying for us on the cross like a sacrificial lamb. And that is well and good if that works for you, but I have other ideas and so I offer some of them here in response to three different scriptures.

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47 (The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Edition)

(The believers share everything in common)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' instructions and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all for many wonders and signs were being performed by the apostles. Those who believed lived together, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another as each had need. They met in the Temple and they broke bread together in

their homes every day. With joyful and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day, God added to their number those who were being saved.

So let's look at this reading. The book of Acts is considered volume 2 of the gospel of Luke. It is thought that the same writer produced both works. Acts relates the story of the early church after Jesus' death. This particular passage is describing what the early community of Jesus' followers was like. They were living and sharing together. Their common faith leads to the holding of goods in common. Possessions serve the common good and respond to any in need. In a way they were living out the notion of Jubilee that they would have been familiar with from their scriptures, a time when debts would be forgiven and slaves would be set free. We might say it was a way for the things that give life to be shared.

We can imagine the questions the neighbours of this group might have asked when they observed the way these followers lived together sharing with and caring for every member of the group. What they observed would have told them much more about the early Christian community than any words could have. The most powerful 'witness' of a Christian community is the way it conducts its life together. In other words - God's presence could be seen in how they lived.

The end of this passage states "day by day God added to their number those who were being saved." My thought is that in this context 'being saved' meant being accepted fully and unconditionally into a loving community. It meant learning how to be inclusive, it meant learning how to be accepting of other people regardless of who they were - male, female, slave, free, rich, poor. It meant being 'saved' from all those external things which kept them from being fully who they were as persons in their own right. It meant being 'saved' from an oppressive society which had very strong rules about how one should act and even whom one could talk to or associate with.

Scripture: John 19:1-10 (The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Edition)

(Jesus is the gate)

The truth of the matter is, whoever doesn't enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep, the one for whom the keeper opens the gate. The sheep know the shepherd's voice; the shepherd calls them by name and leads them out. Having led them all out of the fold, the shepherd walks in front of them and they follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice. They simply won't follow strangers - they'll flee from them because they don't recognize the voice of strangers.

Even though Jesus used this metaphor with them, they didn't grasp what he was trying to tell them. He therefore said to them again: "The truth of the matter is, I am the sheep gate. All who came before me were thieves and marauders whom the sheep didn't heed. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved - you'll go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy. I came that you might have life and have it to the full.

Here we have Jesus trying to get a message across to the disciples. First he talks about the shepherd who calls his sheep and they know his voice and follow him. The shepherd does not sneak around and come in over the fence but talks to them in a familiar voice - a voice which they know and so one which they will follow.

It seems the disciples don't understand this 'figure of speech' so Jesus gets more explicit. He tells them that he is the gate and "whoever enters through me will be saved." There is that phrase again. So what does 'to be saved' mean in this context?

Well, here we get a little more complicated, I think. The gospel of John was the last to be written - it was written about 70 to 80 years after Jesus died. Now during that time a lot had happened and the closest followers of Jesus, of course, were dead and the Christians were beginning to have major disputes with the non-Christian Jews in the synagogues. Many of John's references to 'the Jews' were to those in the synagogue with whom the followers of 'the way' were in dispute - not with the Jewish faith in general. After all, they, themselves, were Jews and up until this time they had continued to attend synagogue and practice as Jews except for the fact that they believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

Much of John's gospel is considered metaphor and a metaphor, of course, is a figure of speech which symbolizes something else. For example, Jesus was not really a gate and the followers were not really sheep - this is a metaphor. John describes Jesus as 'the Word' of God at the beginning of his gospel. This is also a metaphor which tells us that John is not talking about the man, Jesus, but of the Spirit of God which could be seen in him. That Spirit which we call the Christos or Christ is also the spirit that is described in the Old Testament as 'Wisdom' or 'Sophia' which was referred to as being with God from the beginning of creation.

When we realize this fact about the gospel of John we know that we cannot take any of it too literally. Which means when Jesus says that "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved" it does not mean that Jesus is the only way to God. It means that the eternal spirit of God is the gate and whoever embraces and lives in that Spirit will have life in abundance. In other words - when we connect with the God-spirit that is part of us we are freed to live fully into who we are meant to be as children of God. Whether we follow the teachings of Jesus or the Buddha or Mohamed or the Great Spirit, we are still identifying with the Spirit of God which was, is and always will be.

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:19-25 (The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Edition)
(Following Christ's example)

For grace is given if you endure unjust punishment for your conscience in the name of God. What credit is there if you patiently endure harsh punishment as a result of your sin? But if you put up with suffering for doing what is right, this is acceptable in God's eyes. It was for this that you were called, since Christ suffered for you in just this way and left you an example. You must follow in the footsteps of Christ, who did no wrong, who spoke no deceit, who did not return insults when insulted, who, when made to suffer, did not counter with threats. Instead, Christ trusted the One who judges justly. It was Christ's own body that brought our sins to the cross, so that all of us, dead to sin, could live in accord with God's will. By Christ's wounds you are healed. At one time you were straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls.

In this reading it sounds like Peter is saying that suffering is a good thing and that if we want to be like Jesus we need to suffer. I beg to differ. Peter's letter is written to a community that is under heavy persecution. They are suffering and it is important for Peter to recognize that and to try to encourage them to keep the faith. He points out that Jesus suffered and if they truly want to follow him they need to be able to take it as well.

The words 'for us' to me, do not mean he was some kind of sacrifice but rather that he showed us how to remain fully connected to God even, and in spite of, the world doing its worst. I in no way believe that our God, who is nothing but goodness and love, could or would ever 'send' someone to suffer on purpose. My God is not capable of such cruelty. I believe that Jesus came with the purpose to live in perfect harmony with the spirit which created him even if doing that meant that he would die at the hands of those to whom he was a threat.

He 'saved' us by giving us an example to follow. He 'saved' us by not buckling under to the pressures of society and the world. He 'saved' us by showing us that it is possible to live a

human life fully connected to the divine Spirit. When an awareness of the Spirit enters any life, that of Jesus or that of you or me, then fear vanishes and when fear is gone we are freed to live abundantly. We are freed to do what we have to do even if it involves suffering. Peter is not saying suffering is necessary. He is saying suffering is inevitable but it is not the last word. I need to say a bit about sin here because Peter talks about Jesus bearing our sins on the cross. Sin is separation from the God-Spirit within. Sin is being unaware of the presence of Spirit in our lives even though it is there all the time. Sin is ignoring or denying the prompting of the spirit when we are aware of it. So the way the Jesus 'brought our sins to the cross' was to show us that even though he suffered and died he remained connected to the Spirit, to his God, to that which he knew existed within him, to that source of all life from which he came and to which he knew he would return.

Death is not an end. Which is what resurrection is all about. Death is only an end to the physical body. We live on in Spirit to be re-united to the source from which we came as Jesus was.

So the answer to our question - what does it mean to be 'saved'? When we live in communities which focus on sharing and caring and welcoming all into the fold we are saved from isolation and loneliness. When we make an effort to face down injustice and inequality we are saved from oppressive powers that would keep, not only us, but others from the possibility of abundant life. When we practice forgiveness we are saved from angers and resentments that keep us bound and unhappy. When we honour the Spirit of life that lives in ourselves and each other we are saved from selfish ambitions that benefit no one but us. When we open ourselves to following and living a life connected with the Christ-Spirit within us we are saved from the fear that prevents us from being all that we are meant to be as beloved children of God. The Spirit accomplishes great things in lives that are lived together in the Spirit of Christ.

Jesus came to 'save' us from ourselves by showing us a different way of being.

I want to finish with a poem written by one of my favourite authors - Bishop John Shelby Spong. It is entitled "Christpower"

Look at him!

Look not at his divinity,

but look, rather, at his freedom.

Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power,

but look, rather at his infinite capacity to give himself away.

Look not at the first-century mythology that surrounds him,

but look, rather, at his courage to be,

his ability to live

the contagious quality of his love.

Stop your frantic search!

Be still and know that this is God:

this love,

this freedom,

this life,

this being;

and

When you are accepted,
accept yourself;

When you are forgiven,
forgive yourself;

When you are loved,
 love yourself.
 Grasp that Christ power
 and
 dare to be yourself!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Musical Interlude:

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: *Our prayers today are inspired by the words of William Cleary in his book called Centering Prayers. His words struck me as being appropriate for these strange and difficult times we are living through. Let us pray.*

Divine Dynamic Friend Unseen,
 Mystery Everywhere,
 who made a world
 where you yourself could hide almost perfectly,
 anxiety surrounds us with its cloud,
 worry grips us in her thin arms,
 the brown infection of disquiet invades our bones.

Come, break through the darkness of our anxieties
 like a bright probe of life-giving sunshine,
 a surprise touch of warmth on our backs,
 like the promise on the face
 of a mischievous bright child,
 or the symphony of colour
 in a rising sun.

Though we belong to this threatened world,
 the human race,
 and in our backpacks are mandatory dread,
 depression, and restlessness,
 along the lonely road of inevitable pain
 and stalking failure,
 still we choose to hold our heads high, to look to you:
 ahead, above, and standing under all that will be.
 That will be enough, we are sure of it,
 to hold us over till this cloud is gone.
 Your compassionate presence feels all we feel

along with us, and in our sadness
we say Yes to life, such as it is.

Our prayers continue as we pray today for our brothers and sisters Monticello United church and for all those who work on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world.

And we pray for ourselves as we take a silent moment to offer the prayers of our hearts, the joys, concerns and all those things we share with no other. Hear us now, Compassionate Heart... (silence)... Today we remember all those who have to be working close in the presence of the Covid-19 virus - medical personnel, first responders, grocery store workers, and all those who keep the infrastructure of our cities and towns up and running, we remember all those struggling financially during these uncertain times and we pray for the scientists who are working so hard to find treatments and vaccines. And we especially remember those who have lost loved ones during this time, whether it be to the virus or for other reasons, because it is so difficult to face grief without the loving arms of family and friends around us.

Holy Presence, we know that the hurts of this world are not what you want for us. We know that you are with us, our comfort and consolation, even in these hard times. Help us to support each other by being the tangible presence of your loving spirit, the hands and feet of your love in this world.

We offer these and all of our prayers in the name of our brother, Jesus the Christ, who stands among us as we pray together saying...

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 kindom, the power, and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.

Offering:

If you would like to do your part by making a monetary donation to Melville United Church there are a number of ways to do that.

1. *Cheque (post-dated cheques are welcome): 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 or email Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*
4. *E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to secretary@melvilleunited.com*

Thanks to all of you who continue to contribute so much to make Melville the caring community of faith that it is. You are a blessing.

Hymn: All the Way My Saviour Leads Me VU 635

- 1 All the way my Saviour leads me;
what have I to ask beside?
Can I doubt his tender mercy
who through life has been my guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort,
here by faith in him to dwell,
for I know, whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

- 2 All the way my Saviour leads me,
cheers each winding path I tread,
gives me grace for every trial,
feeds me with the living bread.
Though my weary steps may falter,
and my soul athirst may be,
gushing from the rock before me,
lo, a spring of joy I see!

- 3 All the way my Saviour leads me;
O the fullness of his love!
Perfect rest to me is promised
in my Father's house above.
When my spirit, clothed, immortal,
wings its flight to realms of day,
this my song through endless ages,
'Jesus led me all the way!'

Blessing:

Go now, knowing what saves you is your connection
to the Spirit of Love which dwells within you.
Cultivate a relationship with that Presence
which is your inner, true self.
In doing so you will come to know
the Presence that is pure love.
Amen.

Prayer of the Week:

Holy God, pour your light upon us, that we may see you where we least expect to. Lead us to follow in your way rather than in the way of the world. Open us to the love which surrounds us and stills our fears even in the most difficult of situations. Amen.