



Celebrating 175 Years



June 21, 2020

Melville United Church

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**Melville United Church
Sunday June 21st 2020**

Worship prepared today by
Ruth Cooke

Welcome

This service was prepared for Melville United Church, a congregation made up almost entirely of white rural and small town Ontarians. I have also given the link for the service to those in Pike Bay and Lion's Head, which are also congregations composed of mainly white rural and small town Ontarians, with possibly some cottagers thrown in for good measure. This sermon is for those folks.

If you are Black or Indigenous or any other person of colour, I would invite you to listen and to comment and correct me where necessary. I would like to learn from you how to become a better ally. I promise to take you seriously, and to not diminish in any way the truth of your lived experience.

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. We acknowledge our responsibilities to treaty people.

The Christ Candle Is Lit

Call to Worship/Prayer of Approach (written by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Wake me up Lord, so that the evil of racism
finds no home within me.
Keep watch over my heart Lord,
and remove from me any barriers to your grace,
that may oppress and offend my brothers and sisters.
Fill my spirit Lord, so that I may give
services of justice and peace.
Clear my mind Lord, and use it for your glory.
And finally, remind us Lord that you said,
"blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God."
Amen.

Hymn: Let Us Build a House MV 1, verses 1, 2, 4 & 5

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 19: 16-22

The Rich Young Man

Then someone came to [Jesus] and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said

to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 21:12-15

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';
but you are making it a den of robbers."

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry...

Ministry of Music: Word of God Speak, by MercyMe
Suzanne Flewelling, Rene Crespo and Barry Rawn

Meditation:

The two Gospel texts I just read are quite possibly the most challenging of all the words of Jesus for those of us who are comfortable in our lives, and wary of violence as a way to solve problems.

Reading them reminds us that we who belong to the dominant religion, the dominant race, and who are well off physically and spiritually and economically, are not the intended recipients of Jesus' message.

As many of you probably know, on May 25 of this year, a man named George Floyd went into a convenience store and tried to buy a pack of cigarettes with what the clerk said was a fake twenty dollar bill. Police were called, and Floyd was killed after the altercation with Officer Derek Chauvin, a white man with a history of excessive use of force, knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes.

"I can't breathe!" said Floyd, while other officers watched and not only failed to intervene, but prevented others from intervening as well. For the last three minutes, Floyd was motionless without a pulse, but Chauvin kept his pressure on Floyd even as emergency technicians worked to try and save Floyd's life.

Protests began in Minneapolis the day after his death, and have since spread around the globe. The cry "Black Lives Matter" was heard around the world.

News videos and Facebook posts about the protests are inevitably followed with comments denying systemic racism exists, denying that white privilege exists, denying that anything really needs to change all that much. After all, *they're* not racist!

There are also the bumbling attempts at those of us who understand, vaguely, what the issues are and want to help and feel helpless to change things.

And we have Jesus in our midst, telling us that he is with the oppressed and the imprisoned and the poor, and that those of us on top are the ones who must change, not those on the bottom.

For those of us who are unclear about what white privilege is and whether it exists, I have no better example than a Facebook post by a woman named Betsy Bunting. Betsy writes:

This is a picture of me with a counterfeit \$10 bill that has been pinned to my refrigerator for about 10 years.

Ten years ago I took my kids to Wawa after one of my son's baseball games for a snack. I tried to pay with this bill which I had no idea was a fake. The woman working the counter realized immediately it was bad.

No police were called.
I was not accused of being a criminal.
No one dragged me out of the store.
I wasn't thrown on the ground.
No one knelt on my neck.

Here is what happened to me.

The woman assumed that I was an innocent victim who did not know she had a bad bill. She gave me a short lesson on how she knew it was counterfeit. Pretty obvious once I really looked at it. I paid with a different bill AND SHE RETURNED THE COUNTERFEIT TO ME! I brought it home not knowing what to do with a counterfeit bill. I clipped it to my fridge where I have been moving it to clean and putting it back for ten years.

I haven't paid any attention to this bill for years. It has just been... there. It symbolizes a whole lot more to me now.

That textbook case of white privilege in action. White privilege is the automatic assumption that you're innocent because you're white. White privilege is being able to shop in a store without clerks shadowing you because they think you're going to shoplift.

White privilege is being able to drive around without being stopped by police for no reason. White privilege is having minor violations waved off with a warning.

Then there's systemic racism, which is when official policies or the way they are implemented act to the advantage of white people and the disadvantage to people of colour.

For an example, let's talk marijuana.

The use of cannabis was criminalized in 1923 following the publication of the book *The Black Candle*, which played a role in creating a widespread "war on drugs mentality" leading to legislation that "defined addiction as a law enforcement problem". While the writer of the

book, Emily Murphy, expressed racist sentiments typical of her time, she did write that drugs victimize everyone, and members of all races perpetrate the drug trade.

However, drug laws, while theoretically applying to everyone, were disproportionately wielded against racial minorities.

A 2017 report by The Toronto Star found the Toronto police were three times more likely to arrest Black people with no history of criminal convictions for cannabis possession than White people of similar backgrounds. Similarly, Vice News reported that Indigenous people in Regina, Saskatchewan were nine times more likely to face arrest for possession than White people between 2015 to 2017.

This despite the fact that the incidence of cannabis use does not vary much by skin tone.

A criminal record can bar you from gaining meaningful and decently paying employment. It can, in some places, bar you from having access to social services like subsidized housing or welfare. It can bar you from fostering or adopting children, an important consideration when looking at the history of Indigenous children in foster care in this country. It can even deny you custody of your own children. It can bar you from travelling outside the country. It can disqualify you from taking certain educational courses or from graduating, if you are currently enrolled. Those applying for citizenship will have their applications be denied, and may be deported. You can be refused insurance.

All this for smoking a joint, something our Prime Minister has admitted to doing without consequences.

According to the John Howard Society:

“The extent to which blacks and Aboriginals are over represented in Canadian correctional institutions is similar to that of African Americans in the United States”. Blacks are over represented in federal prisons by more than 300% vs their population, while for Aboriginals the over representation is nearly 500%. The same disparities exist in provincial jails. In Nova Scotia Blacks are 2% of the population but 14% of the jail population. In Manitoba Aboriginals are 16% of the population but 70% of the jail population. In Alberta the numbers for Aboriginals are 6% and 39%. Moreover, these imbalances are getting worse, not better.

Once in jail, these minorities are more likely to be subject to disciplinary procedures and less likely to be paroled. Aboriginal people make up more than 21% of federal prisoners but less than 14% of parolees, a 50% under representation.

Let me read that again: *The extent to which blacks and Aboriginals are over represented in Canadian correctional institutions is similar to that of African Americans in the United States*.

Part of our blindness in Canada is thinking that we're better than our neighbours to the south with regards to racial equality. We're not, and to think so is to be willfully blind.

So what do we do? How do we fix what's wrong?

We stand at the feet of Jesus and ask, “What must I do to have eternal life?”

Jesus tells us to obey the commandments that have been part of our history for thousands of years. “Which ones?” we ask.

“You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

“But I’ve done all that!” we reply. “What else is left?”

“Take everything you’ve got, everything you value, and get rid of it. Give it to the poor.”

But...

I don’t believe Jesus was simply telling the rich man that being rich was a sin. What I read from this is that the man’s riches, no matter how much he may think he worked for them, came to him in large part because of systemic imbalance. He was rich because he was favoured by the laws and customs of the day.

We resist that interpretation of wealth. We like to think that many of those who “make it” in this world, including us, did so by the sweat of our brows.

Look at Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon. He started in his parents’ garage.

Well... Look at it this way.

He had a garage. Can you imagine starting a company like Amazon from a two bedroom apartment with six people living in it, with noise and confusion and lack of space?

And let’s not forget his parents, who had \$250,000 to invest in his little start up venture.

When we look really deeply, many of the amazing success stories of our time have at their basis not simply hard work, but underlying wealth, privilege, or the luck of being born in the right place at the right time with the right skin colour.

Many of you listening are homeowners, so you might be surprised to find that globally, the richest 11 percent owned 82.8 percent of all global wealth as of 2019. The lower bar to be in that 11 percent is \$100,000. If you own both your home and a cottage free and clear, you are probably over the \$1 million mark, making you a member of the top 1 percent.

I’m not Jesus. I’m not going to tell you to sell it and give all the money to the poor. In fact, I have some problems with that. I don’t think creating another homeless person or two is going to solve our problems with inequality.

We do need to understand that the system that favoured you also punished others, largely on the basis of the colour of their skin. Today, on average, for every hundred dollars of wealth that white American families have, Black families have five dollars. This impacts their ability to own a home, which is the primary way wealth is built over generations. It impacts their ability to help their children obtain a college education, which is another way of increasing economic status. It impacts their ability to start a business. It also decreases their access to good representation in courts of law, increasing the already high chance of a conviction.

We need to actively work to dismantle that system.

“Defund the Police!” is not a rallying cry to get rid of law and order, but a call to decrease funding to police who are increasingly using military equipment and tactics against unarmed civilians, and put that extra money into social welfare initiatives. For example, this might mean that instead of armed police officers being sent on wellness checks, social workers with experience in mental health issues and conflict resolution would be sent. Such a move might have saved the life of Chantal Moore, an Indigenous woman who was shot by a New Brunswick police officer who had been called in to do a welfare check.

We need to increase funding to those initiatives that effectively work to heal the injustices wrought on racialized communities by our society, while reducing funding to those that have traditionally favoured white people.

Yes, it does mean that we who have much will have to see our standard of living decrease. We will have to share our privilege. We will have to give up having all the answers.

As for not having all the answers...

I’ve done a lot of reading in the last few weeks about how to be an ally in the fight for racial justice in Canada and the world. And after taking the first step of acknowledging that racial injustice persists and that I am part of the system, the second step seems to be to simply shut up and listen.

When I was younger, the cry of social justice activists was to be a “voice for the voiceless.”

It’s only relatively recently that I’ve come to realize that the voiceless do in fact have voices, and that they’re all too often drowned out by white liberal do-gooders who think they know what’s wrong and what poor people or black people or unemployed people or addicted people need.

What’s lost is a sense of humility, the realization that we can never really walk that mile in someone else’s shoes, because we’re wearing our own.

We need to close our mouths, and open our ears and hearts. We need to be willing to listen to the hurt and the pain and the accusations without defending ourselves or our race. We need to be willing to search deep within ourselves for the truth that hurts our self-image.

We need to be willing to give up the *image* of being good, law-abiding Christians, and start to live the *reality* of being loving, courageous, people who follow Jesus into the temple and start overturning the tables of oppression and privilege and injustice.

Amen.

Hymn: Amazing Grace

VU 266

Prayers of Confession & of the People (written for the United Church of Christ Racial Justice Sunday):

O God,
Today we confess that the sin of racial hatred and prejudice
distorts your divine plan for our human lives:

You created us in divine likeness, diverse and beautiful:
In every person, every race is your image.
But too often we fail to recognize your image in all:
Forgive us.

You created us in divine freedom, to be free:
In every decision, every choice is your possibility of justice.
But too often we fail to choose to advocate for your justice for all:
Forgive us.

You created us for divine abundance, to tend and share:
In every garden, every social structure is your seed of community.
But too often we fail to create that community which includes all,
and gives to all equal access to your abundant life:
Forgive us.

Open our eyes to distinguish good from evil
Open our hearts to desire good over evil
Strengthen our wills to choose good over evil,
So that we may create among us your beloved community.
This we pray in the name of the one who taught us to say as we pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done
On Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing

Go forth into the world with the courage to be instruments of love, justice and peace for all of
humanity:

 The courage to speak up,
 The courage to stay silent and listen,
 The courage to act, even in the face of opposition and danger.

God's grace and love extends to all without exception.
Let us live that reality.

Musical Commissioning: Sent Out in Jesus' Name **MV 212**