



September 13, 2020

Melville United Church

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Worship prepared today by
Tom Watson

Words of Welcome and Introduction

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.

The Christ Candle Is Lit

Sharing the Light

We now take a moment to centre ourselves for worship as I light the Christ candle.

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.

Call to Worship:

The song is old. As old as the dawn of time.

And yet as new as this morning's first moments.

For it is a song of love, and forgiveness, and hope.

A song of life, and freedom, and hope.

A song sung by all in Creation.

We gather to join our voices in this song.

Hymn - I Love to Tell the Story (VU 343)

I love to tell the story of unseen things above

Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true

It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

[Chorus] I love to tell the story,

'Twill be my theme in glory,

To tell the old, old story

Of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best

Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song

'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.

[Chorus] I love to tell the story,

'Twill be my theme in glory,

To tell the old, old story

Of Jesus and His love.

Opening Prayer:

Creator God, we give you thanks for the privilege of being here together in this time and place. May we feel your gentle presence among us as we sing the songs of praise and say the prayers that come from the depths of our hearts. We come in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

Ministry of Music - "Word of God, Speak" (by Spirit Sings)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made."

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."

But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

And in anger his lord handed him over until he would pay his entire debt.

So the heavenly God will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Message: "LIFE IN OUR TOWN—BREAK WITH THE PAST, TRY FORGIVENESS"

Some of you know that for the past 25 years or so I have done sermons based on stories from a small place called Our Town. I'm here at Melville for both today and next Sunday, so I'm going to bring you two "Life in Our Town" sermons. Today's is entitled "Break with the Past, Try Forgiveness."

Well, it's been a busy week in our town. Folks have been scurrying around, thinking up things to do to take advantage of the dying days of summer. The air has that musty smell of Fall to it, and when that happens people get kind of like squirrels—trying to store up enough reminders of summer to get them through until at least the beginning of February.

The Julien family slipped away to the cottage for the weekend probably the last before close—up. Vic and Bonnie French threw their annual May 24th" party on Friday night—the French's are always a little bit late with things. It was a smaller event than usual due to the Covid-19 pandemic...just two guests...they had Lyle and Betty Markle over for a backyard barbecue.

Mary Ellen Bowers has been especially busy. Getting the triplets outfitted for their first week at school. She thought a lot about whether to send them to school, because she was concerned about the virus, but in the end she decided to have them go. The triplets are all boys, and hyper-active, and they pretty much wore her out over the summer, so, in most ways, she won't be all that sorry to see them start school.

As a matter of fact, as she watches out the window, and sees them go off down the sidewalk, each carrying their lunch bucket with the 3 ducks on one side and the fire engine on the other, their little caps on backwards the way the big boys wear them, Mary Ellen lets out a sigh of relief. "Whew," she thinks to herself, "maybe now I can get a few minutes to myself for a change."

But she has another thought too. As mothers generally do. About how much she loves them, and how they'll grow up all too soon, and leave her comfortable nest, and maybe not come back all that much, and she'll have all too many minutes to herself. She reaches into her pocket, takes out a Kleenex and dabs her eyes.

Frank and Myrtle Birstead haven't been thinking much about the waning days of summer, or about Fall coming, or school starting, or any of that stuff at all. No, something else has been occupying the Birsteads.

The story actually started back about 3 years ago when the family got Myrtle a stainless steel wok for her 65th birthday. And Myrtle took to that wok like an egg takes to an omelette. For a while, every meal they had was cooked in the wok. "She even does my porridge in that thing," Frank told Casey one day down at the hardware store.

But, after a while, the novelty wore off, and Myrtle went back to more traditional cooking. As a matter of fact, she had forgotten all about that wok. She had forgotten, too, that she had stored it away on a shelf in the garage, until...until...well, until she came home from the grocery store one morning—it was three weeks ago last Tuesday, I think—and found Frank lying underneath the car in the driveway.

Which wasn't, in itself, all that unusual, because Frank, a retired farmer, had done his own work on his car for years, and he has one of those ramps to run his car up on so he can get underneath it.

Myrtle bent down and said, "Whatcha doin, Franklin?"
"Just changln" the oil, Myrt," replied Frank.

And it was right then that she saw it. Frank was using her stainless steel wok for a drip pan.

"Franklin! For heaven's sakes, what are you doing?" she hollered.

"Like I told you, Myrt, I'm changin' the oil."

"But do you know what you're using to catch the oil in?"

To tell you the truth, Frank hadn't thought much about it until then. He'd had to throw away his old drip pan because it had rusted out, and when he looked around the garage, and found that metal pan, it looked like a pretty good candidate for a new one. It was low, and squatty, and about the right size.

Even though he'd really not been sorry that the wok phase had ended, he'd pretty well forgotten what this pan really was. Until now...when in one of those flashes of instant brilliance, it all came back to him. His new drip pan was, sure enough, Myrtle's wok.

"How could you?" Myrtle snorted. "I just don't believe this—you using my wok for a drip pan!"

"But, Myrt, I really didn't recognize it." Even as he said it, he knew it sounded hollow.

Myrtle continued. "My wok that Brenda and Borden and Vicki gave me! How could you do it?"

By the time 3 or 4 days had gone by, Frank could tell that this was not going to pass over quickly. Myrtle's steps around the house were firm and measured. And the air seemed to get a bit stiffer by the day. As if it had been starched before it flowed through their house.

He tried to talk about the incident a couple of times. To explain again how it happened. But to no avail. Myrtle was normally a reasonable woman but this had triggered something primal in her...something that ran so deep it drained away all of her logic. In the same way the oil drained out of Frank's car.

All she would do is look at him and say, "I still don't believe it, Franklin. I just don't believe it. I have never, in all of our 43 years of marriage, laid as much as a little finger on any of your prized possessions, and I come home and find you with my wok under your car..."

"But, Myrt..." Frank sputtered.

"Don't you 'But Myrt' me, Franklin Birstead. You'd better just shut up!"

And Frank knew, from experience, that when she used that tone of voice she meant it. And the air has continued to get more starchy by the day.

He did try a different tactic on Monday. He called Green's Flowers and had them deliver a half dozen roses. He considered ordering a whole dozen, but they were pretty expensive, so he thought he'd try a half dozen first. That way, he wouldn't waste as much money if it didn't help. Above all else, Frank's a practical man.

When the flowers came, all that Myrtle said was, "If you think you can soft-soap me with flowers, I can tell you right now it isn't going to work. Maybe one time it might have, but no more. Franklin, how could you have done such a thing?"

Yes, Frank wondered himself. He could have kicked himself for being so stupid. He had managed to turn this darling, sweet, gentle little woman—the mother of his 3 kids, the woman he really did love—into a combat soldier on red alert. And he felt pretty guilty about it.

It was, as I said, 3 weeks ago last Tuesday and, ever since, the Birsteads have been preoccupied with this incident. That's why they haven't been thinking about summer ending, or Fall coming, or much of anything else.

Myrtle has been trying to figure out what to do about it. And Frank has been wondering if maybe, while Myrtle was sleeping, he could hook her up to his computer and purge her memory bank...same way you reformat a hard drive...in order for them to get back on an even keel.

Well, that's the news from our town for this week. At least, from the stories that I've heard.

Now, let's examine this.

Why does Myrtle make such a big deal over a wok? Especially one she hasn't even used for about 2 1/2 years. In some ways, the whole thing seems rather trivial, doesn't it?

But we all know, from too much experience, that it's often the little, seemingly trivial, things that cause us the most difficulty in our relationships. And every once in a while something hooks us and, just as with Myrtle, won't let us go. So that being the case, what's going to fix it?

Actually, we know, don't we? The thing that will fix it requires breaking with the past. It's called forgiveness.

Peter knows it's important, so he goes to Jesus and says, "Jesus, if somebody does something wrong to me, I forgive them. But how often am I to do it? As many as 7 times?"

Actually, Peter makes his inquiry a touch more concrete than I've just said. He asks, "If another member of the church sins against me...?" Notice it's another member of the church. Somebody sitting right there across the aisle. That's pretty close in. Not as close as husband and wife as in the case of Frank and Myrtle Birstead but still pretty close.

Peter wants to know if that other church member sins against him, should he forgive him/her 7 times.

And in case we might think otherwise, 7 times is a lot. As a matter of fact, the religious law of the time held that forgiving someone else 3 times fulfilled one's obligations. At 3 times, you had done all that could be expected of you.

But here's Peter doubling it and then adding one more for good measure. 7 times. Big-hearted Peter. 7 times. That's big forgiveness. 7 is the Jewish symbol for completeness. Forgiving 7 times is complete forgiveness.

But hold on. Jesus astounds him when he says, "Nope, Peter. 7 times is not nearly enough. 70 times 7 times."

I mean, how do you do it? That's tough. They do something to you and you forgive them, and then they do it again, and you forgive them again, and they just keep doing it to you. For heaven's sake, when do you pull the plug?

Well, I suspect that Myrtle Birstead will get over Frank's using her wok for a drip pan. And, in due course, she'll forgive him. I suspect that most of us, put in Myrtle's place, would eventually decide that this incident just isn't worth all the stress and strain that it's causing, and we'd make up. After all, we know that the only way to re-establish right relationships is forgiveness.

On the other hand, maybe she won't forgive him. That's always an option too. And the last thing we should do is pretend that forgiveness is easy. It's not. In fact, I think it's the toughest thing we have to learn to do. I know it is for me.

And there are some things that seem like a mountain for us to get over. But until we do, we lug whatever it is around, and it just wears us down, little by little...and, if we're not careful, it will wear us out.

I think that's why Jesus stressed it so much. Because Jesus knew that forgiveness is the only thing that creates future. Without it we stay stuck in the past, and something in us dies.

So I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful that Myrtle Birstead will find the way to forgive Frank. I really am hopeful. I'd like to be able to tell you one day that it all worked out in the end.

But, in the meantime...do you, or I, know anybody that we need to forgive?
Amen.

Hymn - Great is Thy Faithfulness (VU 288)

Great is thy faithfulness, God our Creator,
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not
As thou hast been thou forever will be.
Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, ever to me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.
Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, ever to me!

Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Hymn - Amazing Grace (VU 266)

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.

'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun

We'll have no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.

Departing Prayer

May each of us be a channel of God's peace

Where there is hatred, let us bring love

Where there is injury, pardon,

And where there's sadness, let us bring joy.

May it be so.

Amen.