



September 20, 2020

Melville United Church

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Worship prepared today by
Tom Watson

Words of Welcome and Introduction

Acknowledgment of Indigenous Territory

I will begin in the way Melville folks have become accustomed.
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

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:

When I am awake, and when I am asleep...

God is with me.

When I am talking, and when I am listening...

God is with me.

When I feel strong, and when I feel very weak and tiny...

God is with me.

When I feel lost and alone, and when I feel found and secure...

God is with me.

We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Hymn - Spirit of the Living God (VU 376)

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, move among us all.

Make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love:

Humble, caring, selfless, sharing.

Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love.

Opening Prayer: Gracious, ever-present God, once again we gather as your people. We come to praise, to learn, to share our faith with one another. We come to give thanks for the week just past, and to be blessed with hope for the week to come. Be with us in this time and place. We come in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

Ministry of Music - "Sing a New Church - Eugene Englert " (by Colleen Weber)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?"

They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Message: "LIFE IN OUR TOWN—WHAT'S FAIR?"

Today, I have another Life in Our Town story/sermon for us. It's called "Life in Our Town-What's Fair?" But we'll start in the usual way.

Well, it's been a busy week in our town. Especially for moms and dads who had to think through whether to send their children to school. And there's no right decision in this regard. Some are keeping their children home because they're not sure it's safe yet. Others believe that their children won't adapt well to online learning and, regardless, there's the need for socialization.

Ah, it's a wonderful experience being a parent! Not easy, but nonetheless wonderful. Jack and Lula Cameron were busy the other day. Thursday evening, I think it was. Well, actually, it started back a couple of weeks ago when they discovered that a skunk had taken up residence under their back porch. So they got a skunk trap, trapped it, and took it out of town a couple of miles and let it go.

On the way back home, Lula said, "Boy, Jack, we're fortunate to get out of that so easy! Just think what would have happened if Lucky had gotten mixed up with that skunk!" Lucky's the family dog.

They were still feeling pretty relieved until Thursday evening. Lula had put the dog out in the back yard after supper and when she went to let him back in...well, it was unmistakably clear that Lucky's luck had run out. And theirs too! Obviously, there was more than the one skunk they had trapped and taken out of town.

It was Lula's birthday on Thursday, and Jack had invited four friends over for a bit of a surprise social time on their back deck on Thursday evening...but, frankly, none of them were in the mood to stay very long after they got there. So it turned out to be more like a 20 minute come-and-go tea.

Lucky, as you might imagine, wasn't a very happy camper. And by the time Jack had given Lucky the third tomato juice bath, he wasn't in all that good a humour either.

Lucky's a Great Dane, which means that he's not all that easy to manage in the bath tub at the best of times, but when you throw in the way he was feeling about himself on Thursday evening...well...

And Lula...well, Lula decided to go and stay overnight at a friend's house. But before she left, she reminded Jack that she had never wanted to get a dog in the first place, that it was his idea, and if they had to get a dog why couldn't they have got a responsible size one rather than one that's as big as some Shetland ponies.

And maybe Jack might consider taking the Great Dane outside of town and letting him go at the same place he released the skunk they had trapped, so he could romp around in the bush with all the skunks he wanted to.

"Anyway, Jack," Lula said, "call me tomorrow...or whatever day you've got this situation under control!"

If you had driven by the Cameron house about 11 o'clock on Thursday evening, you'd have seen Jack and Lucky both sitting there in the living room, just sitting there staring at one another, both worn right out, and both wondering just how the future was going to unfold.

Now, I'm not sure whether or not it was the future that was unfolding the other day down at Mason's Electrical Plant, but if it was I can tell you that not everybody was happy about it. Here was the conversation when the old guys gathered down at the old slough for coffee yesterday.

As I'm sure I told you before, the old guys had to quit going to Al's Café for morning coffee when Covid-19 set in. So now, they pick up their coffee at a drive-by window that Al cut in the side of his café, and head on over to the slough where they can sit in their lawn chairs and stay socially distanced.

When Bob Smithers got there yesterday morning, he was really steamed. "You know what?" he said. "That's gratitude for ya! Yesterday, when they came to give out the annual bonuses,

everybody got the same amount, no matter how long they'd worked there! I just can't believe it. 20 years I've been there, and this!"

Hank Vickers said, "Well, I know that they took on a whole bunch of new people over the past year. But, you mean to tell me that all those new ones got just as much bonus as you, and all the others who have worked there for 20 years or more?"

"Not only that" said Bob, "but even the part-timers got just as much as I did!"

"Well," said Fred Bowers, "our daughter, Emily, has been working part-time there for the past 6 months, and she was really thrilled to get a bonus, because she can really use the money."

"Oh, I'm sure Emily can use the money alright, Fred," said Bob, "but I just think that those of us who have worked there the longest deserve more than those who just started. After all, it was us who carried that company during those years when things were so tough. I think I'll sit down and write a letter to old man Mason and tell him what I think. It's just not fair!"

"Yeah," chipped in Teddy Green, "and did you hear about the electric coffee makers that they gave away Wednesday afternoon? My wife, Jenny, went down there at 7 in the morning, to get in line for one of those free coffee makers, and when they came out at 3 0'clock to give them away they went to the end of the line and started there."

"Did Jenny get one?" asked Fred Bowers.

"Yes," replied Teddy, "but that's not the point. People who got there first should have got one first. It's only fair! What if they'd run out before they got to Jenny? I think something's happened to old man Mason—he's sure been acting strange lately."

When Frank Birstead went home for dinner, he told Myrtle about the morning's discussion. Mostly about whether or not what happened down at Mason's Electrical Plant was fair.

Myrtle rocked away in her rocking chair for a few minutes and then asked, "Well, Franklin, did Bob Smithers get as much bonus as he expected to?"

"Yes, I guess so," Myrt. "Actually, he said it was the most bonus he ever got."

"And Jenny got a coffee maker?"

"Yes, Myrt, she got a coffee maker."

"Well then, Franklin, I guess I just don't see the problem. Both Bob and Jenny got everything they wanted. Why should they be upset because Mr. Mason took a generous streak and gave something to somebody else?"

And all during lunch, Frank and Myrtle Birstead talked on about this. About whether it was a good thing that Mr. Mason did. About how things should work. And about what's fair.

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

Now, what do you think? Should newly hired, part-time workers get the same bonus as people who worked at the plant for 20 years? Is it fair for people to stand at the head of the line for

several hours to get a free coffee maker, only to have them start the give-away at the foot of the line?

Imagine. It's in a time when you aren't restricted by the pandemic. Your favourite rock group, The Whining Rhinos, is coming to the Sky Dome. So you go there and line up for 18 hours to get a ticket the minute they go on sale—and for 6 hours of that time it's raining—and when the ticket booth opens they wheel a cart out and start selling tickets at the back of the line. Hey, what gives? I was here first!

Let's be honest. That's not the way it's supposed to work! Keeners get first dibs. Hard work and dedication is rewarded.

I remember my dad telling me about one winter when he worked at Ford Motor Company in Windsor. There was this other fellow who worked with him, and the other guy was a slacker. He'd go off and lay down and have a nap a couple of times a day, and leave my dad to do the work. But whenever the foreman made the rounds, there he was—working as hard as he could possibly work.

So one day my dad took him aside and warned him about showing him up in front of the foreman. I mean, it wasn't fair, what he was doing.

And we all know that there is a fair way to do things. People who work the longest and hardest deserve the biggest reward. People at the head of the line deserve to be served first. It's only fair. And if you don't do it fairly, the whole system breaks down.

On the other hand, we know too that Life itself isn't fair. People don't get what they deserve. Ask anyone stricken with a terminal illness in the prime of their life. Ask the people who had to flee their homes from the recent fires in California. As the families who have met any tragedy.

On a more basic level, ask some of us if we think the taxes we pay are fair. Or on the other side of the coin, ask the people whose jobs are sacrificed in order that you and I might pay lower taxes if they think what's happened to them is fair.

And then there's this business about being at the front of the line rather than at the back of it. I remember when I was a little boy—and I emphasize little, because I was small then—and this was back in the days before my superior athletic ability had fully blossomed—and we'd be going to play some kind of game, and a couple of captains would start choosing teams. Want to know who was always, the last to be chosen?

Because I was the smallest...and the poorest player...I was at the back of the line. And I longed, just once, to be chosen first. Just once. But, as we all know, they always start at the front of the line—with the best—it's just the way the world works.

And then along comes Jesus with this story about the workers in the vineyard. And the people who worked only one hour were paid just as much as those who worked all day long. Frankly, it cuts against the grain. It's just not fair.

But then Jesus asks the same question Myrtle Birstead asked: If everybody got all they expected to, why do they begrudge somebody else getting something? Is it not okay for the landowner in the story...or Mr. Mason down at Mason's Electrical Plant, to be generous?

Well no, Jesus, it's not! Because people should get what they deserve. Equal pay for equal work—otherwise what happens to incentive? The people at the front of the line get theirs first— otherwise what's the point in having a line? You go around rewarding all the Johnny-comelately's just as if they'd been there all along and...

"So," Jesus says, "I take it that you see yourself at the front of the line."

Why, of course I'm at the front of the line, Jesus! I'm one of the workers who worked all day long!

Jesus continues, "Okay, but just suppose for a minute that you're actually at the back of the line... one of the last worker to be hired."

"Okay."

"Is it okay now for the plant owner to be generous?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but...oh, I get it...this story isn't about fairness at all!"

It's about generosity! It's about the overwhelming, unrelenting generosity of God. The God who reverses all the line-ups so the last get just as much as the first!

You know, it's probably the hardest thing any of us ever have to learn—that we don't have to earn anything from God! Some of us tie our whole life up in knots, working hard and long, standing at the front of the line forever, because we think that's what we have to do to earn God's favour.

But there's nothing to earn. For our God is generous.
God just takes us as we are. And gives beyond all our deserving.
And isn't it a good thing that God is like God is?
Amen.

Hymn - To Show By Touch and Word (VU 427)

To show by touch and word devotion to the earth,
To hold in high regard all life that comes to birth,
We need, O God, the will to find the good you had of old in mind.

Renew our minds to choose the things that matter most,
Our hearts to long for truth till pride of self is lost.
For every challenge that we face we need your guidance and your grace.

Let love from day to day be yardstick, rule and norm,
and let our lives portray your word in human form.
Now come with us that we may have your wits about us where we live.

Offering

I know that Melville members continue to support the church through PAR or electronic means. Your ongoing support is sincerely appreciated. Thank you for all that you do.

Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Hymn - Though I May Speak (VU 372)

Though I may speak with bravest fire,
And have the gift to all inspire,
And have not love, my words are vain
As sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,
And striving so my love profess,
But not be given by love within,
The profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control,
Our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
By this we worship, and are freed.

Departing Prayer

May all the words that we speak

Be a blessing for all who hear them.

May all the things that we do

Be a blessing to all around us.

May all of our lives be a blessing to someone

Just as we have been blessed by others.

May it be so, this days and always.

Amen.