



May 2, 2021

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Melville United Church
May 2, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Presiding today - Rev. Marion Loree

Sharing the Light: *(If you are watching this on-line or reading it from a page I invite you to take a moment to light a candle, centre yourself and prepare to enter into a time of worship and prayer. As you light your candle repeat the following words)*

We light a candle today to remind us

that there is a mysterious power or presence that connects us all -
we call it God.

that this mysterious presence dwells within each of us -

as it did in the person of Jesus whom we call the Christ.

that we *cannot* be separated from this Presence that is

the Spirit of Love which created us and that is part of us always.

Welcome

My name is Marion Loree and I am the minister here at Melville United Church in Fergus, Ontario. We gather in community today - May 2, 2021, the fifth Sunday of the Easter Season. We are meeting virtually because of Covid-19 restrictions. There will be no in-person worship services until restrictions have been lifted and we can ensure the safety of all who might attend.

So, I invite you to sit back and relax and let your heart and mind be open to whatever message the Spirit may have for you today as we talk about love and prayer.

Announcements:

We give many thanks to Helen Fishburn of the CMHA-WW for last week providing us with a very informative video about all the resources available to folks in our area around Mental Health needs and to the Social Justice Team, especially Jane O'Leary, for arranging that information for us.

Acknowledgment:

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.

Call to Worship:

Come, let us gather, open to Spirit's voice.

Come, let us gather, seeking God's wisdom.

Come, let us gather, to learn from and teach each other.

Come, let us gather to worship.

- 1 It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing:
that's how it is with God's love,
 once you've experienced it:
you spread God's love to everyone,
you want to pass it on.

- 2 What a wondrous time is spring when all the trees
 are budding,
the birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming;
that's how it is with God's love,
 once you've experienced it:
you want to sing, it's fresh like spring,
you want to pass it on.

- 3 I wish for you, my friend, this happiness that I've found -
on God you can depend, it matters not where
 you're bound;
I'll shout it from the mountain top;
 I want my world to know:
the Lord of love has come to me,
I want to pass it on.

Words of Wisdom:

-Denise Levertov (Life Prayers from around the world.)

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
free-fall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

Opening Prayer:

Vine-grower, we come to grow and learn together.
Nourish us in the life we share, and teach us how to thrive.
May we draw closer to you as our hearts and minds
are shaped by your love shared in worship.
Each of us is gifted with the ability to love,
yet there are times we fail to act in loving ways.
We have not always loved our neighbour as ourselves.
We have not always respected those who live in community with us.

Opening prayer (cont'd)

We reject the love of others at times,
and even fail to love ourselves.

All these create distance between us and the presence of your Spirit within us.

Forgive us, connect us, and strengthen us,
to bear good fruit today and in the days to come. Amen.

Words of Assurance:

Friends, know that you are forgiven and have nothing to fear.

In the words of 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear..."

Hear it and believe it!

Thanks be to God.

Ministry of Music: I Am the Vine

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21 (The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation)
(Everyone who loves is born of God)

Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God; everyone who lives is begotten of God and has knowledge of God. Those who do not love have known nothing of God, for God is love. God's love was revealed in our midst in this way: by sending the Only Begotten into the world, that we might have faith through the Anointed One.

Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us. And has sent the Only Begotten to be an offering for our sins.

Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us. The way we know that we remain in God and God in us is that we have been given the Spirit. We have seen for ourselves and can testify that God has sent the Only Begotten as Saviour of the world. When any acknowledge that Jesus is the Only Begotten, God dwells in them and they in God.

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them.

Love will come to perfection in us when we can face the day of judgment without fear - because our relation to this world is just like Christ's. There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. To fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love.

We love because God first loved us. If you say you love God but hate your sister or brother, you are a liar. For you cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you hate your neighbour, whom you have seen. If we love God, we should love our sisters and brothers as well; we have this commandment from God.

“Beloved, let us love one another.” Such beautiful words and such a lovely sentiment. Wouldn’t it be great if we could only do that? Wouldn’t it be a wonderful world if people could truly learn to love each other? It brings to mind images of sunshine and flowers and smiling people everywhere living in happiness and contentment and harmony. You know - the world that we often see depicted in many of the commercials on TV that have everyone laughing and having a good time. Why is it that everyone is always smiling and having fun in those commercials? And, we are told, this is how we can be if we only buy whatever product is being promoted. A carefree, happy life is available at the drop of a few dollars.

Not a very realistic picture, is it? An idyllic world where everyone lives in peace and happiness and harmony sounds like a fairy tale. And fairy tales with their ‘happily ever after’ endings are not the experience of most of us. And, you know, I don’t think fairy tales are what Jesus was talking about either when he gave that command to ‘Love one another.’”

I think Jesus was a very realistic kind of guy. I think Jesus knew exactly what being human and living in this world was like and how difficult it could be at times. I think that Jesus knew only too well that life wasn’t and never would be all sunshine and flowers.

Life is a mix. Life can be dirty and painful as well as beautiful and lovely. Life happens to everyone regardless of who we are, where we come from, what kind of upbringing we had or whether we are rich or poor or in-between. Being human means we will have ups and downs, joys and sorrows, good experiences and not so good experiences. Life on this earthly planet means sometimes we will be beaten down, overwhelmed and hurt. In other words - to be human is to suffer at times and suffering is an inevitable part of life and living. And that, to me, is what makes Jesus’ words and example so important and so much more meaningful.

Jesus’ idea of love is what can make life worth living because Jesus’ idea of love doesn’t even suggest that there is some kind of impossible ideal that we should all be striving for. Jesus’ kind of love doesn’t attempt to remove the obstacles of life or ‘save’ us from the reality that life is. On the contrary, Jesus’ kind of love is found in the midst of life, in the dirtiest of places as well as in the most beautiful. Jesus’ kind of love challenges us to overcome the realities of life and look for the God-spark in every person. Jesus’ kind of love means helping each other wade through the muck until we find dry land on the other side. Jesus’ kind of love means clinging to each other’s hand in the darkness until we see the light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus’ kind of love means holding each other while we shed tears of grief. Jesus’ kind of love means laughing and sharing the joys of life - together.

Jesus’ kind of love is a God kind of love. A love that is there, no matter what, to support, encourage and share - a love that is more concerned with being with than with buying in. Jesus’ kind of love requires no purchase to make it effective. There is nothing we can do to earn the love that Jesus speaks of. We can’t buy it, steal it, or earn it in any way. It is unconditionally ours from the day we are born - no matter who or what we are. It is free. It is always there. It is life-giving. It is to be shared. And it is in the sharing of that kind of love that God is revealed. “Love is of God and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them.” Beautiful words indeed.

And those are some thoughts about that scripture passage.

Scripture: John 15:1-8*(Jesus is the true vine)*

"I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vine grower who cuts off every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit but prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield. You've been pruned already, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you. Live on in me, as I do in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, neither can you bear fruit apart from me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them will bear abundant fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. Those who don't live in me are like withered, rejected branches, to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned. If you live on in me, and my words live on in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. My Abba will be glorified if you bear much fruit and thus prove to be my disciples.

Reflection: The True Vine

The gospel of John is unique. It is unique in a number of ways. One is that it reads differently than all the rest. The other three - Matthew, Mark and Luke - are similar in that they relate many of the stories of Jesus in the same way, some almost word for word. Some stories are changed to varying degrees to suit particular needs of their authors, but they are similar, none the less.

The gospel of John differs greatly. It is believed that this fourth gospel was written 75 to 100 years after Jesus' death and so it was written after those who were becoming known as Christians were expelled from the synagogues.

Scholars have suggested that the gospel of John is meant to be read metaphorically, as much of the Bible should be, but this part maybe more so than the rest. If we read it this way - metaphorically - then we need to realize to what the writer of John is likening Jesus. (A metaphor is a figure of speech using one term or phrase to describe something else). The author of John likens Jesus to the Spirit of God and it is from this gospel, when it is taken literally, that the idea comes that Jesus *was* God or that Jesus and God are one and the same. If, on the other hand, we read this gospel metaphorically, I think it becomes much more readable, more believable and more universal in nature.

The gospel of John contains many passages that begin with the words "I am." These verses are metaphors to help us understand the person and work of Jesus as *the Christ*. A key phrase here is 'the Christ' which actually translates as "God's anointed" or "chosen one." It is not Jesus' second name as it sounds and is sometimes thought.

Jesus was a person. A blood and bones real-life human person just like you and me. But the way he lived and taught and conducted himself was so extra-ordinary that people were drawn to him. He treated all people equally. He healed the sick. He preached freedom and acceptance and justice for all. He said and did things that were completely contrary to custom and belief at that time. He even defied the church authorities, which is what got him killed in the end.

Jesus' ways turned the world upside-down, so to speak. He talked about a new paradigm - a new world view based on love and justice and equality. The followers began to believe - to hope - that he was the Messiah promised in scripture who would come and deliver them from the oppression of Rome and set the nation of Israel back on its feet. So, when his rebellious ways got him crucified, followers had to find a new frame of reference for him and new ways to convince people of the truth of his message.

As time passed the stories and legends grew until here we have the author of John describing him as the very Spirit of God. The gospel begins "In the beginning there was the Word; the word was in God's presence, and the Word was God." Another term for "Word" in this context is "Spirit," "Breath of God", "Ruach" or "Sophia" depending on the language. If we don't read this gospel as a metaphor the deep meaning and truth of it can be lost. It is not the man Jesus specifically that the author is talking about but the Spirit of God that his followers saw in him, which is evident in his message and is of main importance.

The 'true vine' that the gospel speaks of is the Spirit of God. When the writer has Jesus saying, "I am" he is meaning "the Spirit of God is." And when we read it this way it makes a lot more sense to me, and it opens up the gospel to be much more inclusive. "The Spirit of God is the way, the truth and the life" is much more inclusive. Instead of literally thinking that one has to accept Jesus as the only way to God, we can read it knowing that *to live in Spirit* is the way to God, regardless how one perceives or embodies that Spirit.

There is only one God and to limit the Holy Presence to one image, to one person, even to Jesus, is to limit God. God is the animating life force of the universe, the ground of all being, the universal energy that flows in, around and through everything that is. That cannot be contained in any one human person.

God is the vine-grower, and we are the branches that bear fruit because we are a direct outgrowth from the vine that is the Spirit of God just as Jesus was. When we live with the awareness that we are connected to the vine - to God/Spirit - the wellspring of all that is good, we *will* bear fruit; we *will* live in love; we *will* be enabled to love one another as God first loved us.

There is lots more that can be said about this passage but those are some thoughts that came to me when I read it this time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Preparation for Prayer:

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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 prayer time.

Silent Preparation:

Prayers:

Generous Giver of Life, ground of our being, source of love and all that is, we come in these days of spring, waiting and watching as life begins to blossom and open around us on vine and stem. In this strange season of pandemic, open us, loving God, as we wait and watch for healing and understanding.

In Christ, we are invited to see with new eyes and feel with wider compassion. Meet us in the places where we are wounded and meet us in the shadows of our souls where we may not have yet found the light of your love that dwells even there. Awaken us to this new day that you are co-creating with us in spirit and truth, in life and love and joy. Awaken us to the ever-present possibilities that are ours if we only open ourselves to them. Although all may seem bleak around us, remind us that, with you, everyday can be a great day, every day can be a day of learning, every day is a day to share your love with all whom we meet.

Today we pray for all those who are ill of mind, body or spirit. We pray for all those who are working so hard to care for the victims of the Covid-19 virus. They deserve our utmost gratitude and support. We pray for all those who have no choice but to go to work everyday so we can have the necessities we need- food and medicines and many other things. We pray for those working to administer vaccines to all of us so we can begin to see an end to the pandemic.

We pray today for our brothers and sisters of Ebenezer 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, in a moment of silence, we open our hearts to offer the concerns, the gratitude and the joys we find there. Hear now our individual prayers... (silence)... Ground of Being, each day we wake and wonder what you have in store for us. Some days we find the answer in goodness and some days we find the answer in challenges and some days we find the answer in places we least expect it. Remind us always that one thing we can be sure of is that when we seek answers, we will find them.

We offer these and all our prayers in the name of our brother, Jesus the Christ, who stands with and 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 Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*
4. E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to secretary@melvilleunited.com

Offering Prayer:

Holy Presence, we offer now, the fruits of our lives - a portion of our material resources, our time, and our talent. Use these things and our whole lives to make your love known in this troubled and hurting world. Amen.

Hymn: God Give Us Life (spoken)

VU 704

- 1 God give us life when all around
 spells death and some have died;
 and none are clear that hope is near
 or fate can be defied.
- 2 God give us love in heart and hand
 to hold the hurting one,
 to free the anger, meet the need
 and wait till waiting's done.

- 3 God give us skill, insight and will
to find, where none are sure,
new threads to mend the web of life,
new means to heal and cure.
- 4 God give us faith should all else fail
and death unsheath its sting.
O help us hear, through pain and fear,
the songs that angels sing.
- 5 Then, in the end, make death a friend,
and give us strength to stand
and walk to where no eye can stare,
but Christ can clasp our hand.

Blessing/Sending Forth:

Jesus said, "I am the true vine and you are the branches."
Go now, prepared to grow in God's love.
Go to bear much fruit, so that you and all whom you encounter
might know the sweetness and the depth of God's love.
Go in peace, knowing you never go alone,
for God is with you - always.
Amen.

Postlude:**Prayer of the Week:**

It is your divine love that enables us to grow and bear fruit, Creator God, and nothing can separate us from that love. May we see the needs around us and respond as we can, without fear or reluctance. Fill us with the joy of service in the way of Jesus. Amen.