



Celebrating 175 Years



August 1, 2021

Melville United Church

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**Melville United Church
Sunday, August 1, 2021**

* *Congregation please stand as you are able.*
Bold print invites congregational response.
 Presiding today: Ruth Cooke

**Welcome & Announcements
 Sharing the Light
 Prelude/Centering Time**

Call to Worship:

This is no ordinary place: this is the house of God.

**This is the place where the prophets cry out
 for peace and justice and righteousness.**

It is the place where God reaches down
 into the corners of our lives,
 to offer us the mystery of holy love.

This is no ordinary gathering.

This is no ordinary place: this is the house of God.

Opening Prayer:

**O Holy Spirit, Breath of God, blow in our lives this day. Fill us with the
 freshness of your living love. Cleanse and renew us that we might go
 from this place, ready to be your people in the world. Amen.**

***Hymn: "Let There Be Light" VU 679**

- 1 Let there be light,
 let there be understanding,
 let all the nations gather,
 let them be face to face;

- 2 Open our lips,
 open our minds to ponder,
 open the door of concord
 opening into grace;

- 3 Perish the sword,
perish the angry judgement,
perish the bombs and hunger,
perish the fight for gain;
- 4 Hallow our love,
hallow the deaths of martyrs,
hallow their holy freedom,
hallowed be your name;
- 5 Your kingdom come,
your spirit turn to language,
your people speak together,
your spirit never fade;
- 6 Let there be light;
open our hearts to wonder,
perish the way of terror,
hallow the world God made.

Prayer of Confession:

From "A Time For Hope: Worship Resources" by the Presbyterian Church in Canada

God of all peoples, in all times and places.

Your creation sings your praise.

Your son teaches us the ways of love, justice, and peace.

Your Spirit emboldens our hearts and hands to build the world according to your will.

We confess our brokenness:

We do not hear the cries of those who are suffering because it is inconvenient and costly to respond.

We do not acknowledge truths that make us uncomfortable.

We reject and belittle those who are different than we are.

We are blind to the ways we benefit today from a legacy of hurt against Indigenous people.

Too often we love imperfectly, speak harshly, and judge quickly.

(A moment of silence)

Reconciling God,

We are called to gentleness, to compassion and to radical acceptance of difference.

In Christ Jesus, we are learning to walk in new ways with new companions.

We are learning to surrender the need to justify, to explain and to fix.

We are learning to listen: when creation groans, we groan as well.

When your people speak out against injustice, we honour their courage and stand with them.

Spirit of God, create in us feeling hearts, clear eyes, and open minds.

Words of Assurance:

It's hard to believe that God could possibly forgive anything so vile as the crimes that happened at the Indian Residential Schools, and the crimes against humanity that have been happening since.

But we worship the God of Cain, who slew his own brother, we worship the God of David, adulterer and murderer, we worship the God of Judas, the betrayer, we worship the God of Paul, who watched and did nothing as Stephen was stoned to death. And this God loves us all, despite all we have done or not done, and welcomes our true repentance and return to the fold.

In Christ we are forgiven and reconciled to God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

First Reading: Mark 11: 15-19

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?

But you have made it a den of robbers."

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Second Reading: Matthew 7: 1-5; 15-29

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God!

Meditation: “Overturning Tables I: *Should* the Church be Saved?”

Would you pray with me and for me please...

In 2013, the United Church did a projection of numbers that showed the decline of the church between 1990 and 2013, and then projected it into the future, and concluded that if the decline continued at the same pace, by 2025 there would be a worship attendance across Canada of just 34,000 people, 160 people baptized, and no members, no Sunday Schools, no marriages.

By 2013, it was projected that the United Church of Canada had just twelve years of life left.

A similar projection done by the Anglican Church of Canada has the church gone by 2040.

I have preached on these numbers before. In fact, I believe that I preached on them within the last year or so.

My question then, which is the question so many Christians ask, was, "Can the church be saved?"

And my answer was and remains, "Yes, of course it can!"

First off, I don't quite believe the United Church numbers. There has been a revival in the past few years, where urban and suburban churches have discovered the evangelicalism isn't just the property of conservative Christians, and numbers in some churches are growing.

And some smaller churches have proven to be remarkably resilient and are hanging on and innovating in order to stay alive.

No, I don't believe the church is going to be all but gone within the next four years.

But now, a year or so after I first read those projections, I am asking a slightly different question, one that perhaps ought to be answered before we start trying desperately to save what we have.

And that question is, "*Should* the church be saved?"

Something inside of me broke within the last few weeks.

There were cracks already, I think. But the news of the discovery completely shattered my belief that the institutional church could and should continue as it is, with only minor tweaks.

Yes, I knew about the evils of the residential schools, and I knew that although we have apologized and set up the Healing Fund, our Indigenous Peoples still face hardships and discrimination that are the result of ongoing prejudice against them, and the result of the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school system. But I believed that with time, these wounds could heal and that the problems in our churches and our society that led to the horrors could be fixed.

But the concrete evidence of the bodies of over a thousand children and counting, and the resulting anger of non-Christians, many of whom are loving, caring people, has hit home in a way that mere words cannot.

I'm not sure I believe now that the church in its present form should be saved. Sometimes, when something is broken, it can be repaired and function as good as new.

But sometimes, when something is broken, it's broken so badly that it can't be repaired. And sometimes, even when new it never operated as it should have.

I am coming to the belief that the institutional church is broken beyond repair, and that if the church is to continue, we need to cast down what is and rebuild completely.

I believe that we have built the foundations of the church on sand, not rock.

The rumblings have been there since before the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The Nicene Creed was developed to assert the doctrine of the divinity of Christ over the Arian belief that Christ was created by the Father.

We started building our churches on the foundation of doctrine rather than the foundation of the love of God shown through Christ. Adherence to doctrine, not individual loving actions, became the mark of the "true Christian," and have remained so ever since.

It has caused splits in the church and continues to cause splits. And the adherence to doctrine, including the doctrine of the inerrancy and primacy of scripture so prominent amongst reformed churches, has caused the church to sin and to continue to sin down through the ages.

We have built our church upon the sands of human words and human writings and human thoughts, and it is causing the church to crumble as we sit here this morning.

In one sense, it's inevitable. The church and all religion *are* human inventions, and they will, like all human works, eventually perish. Something new will take their place.

But right now, as Christians, we need to take a close look at the Christian faith and ask ourselves how we might reinvent the church so that it is more aligned with the primary commands of Jesus: that we love our neighbours as ourselves. That we give up the pursuit and hoarding of riches and aid the poor and needy. That we heal the sick and free the prisoners and clothe the naked and house the homeless.

That we give without thought of return, even the return of belief in God.

That we proclaim Jesus crucified and risen by our actions, not our doctrine and our words. That we go into all the nations and baptize in the name of the Trinity, yes, but that we baptize *willing* persons who have come to us freely, as the Ethiopian eunuch did in Acts 8. And that, like Phillip, we baptize those who ask regardless of race, or adherence to sexual norms, or even profession of adherence to doctrine.

Phillip had merely preached the good news, and the eunuch asks him, "What is preventing me from being baptized?"

Phillip did not say, "You haven't taken a six-month long course in scriptures." He did not say, "You're a eunuch." He did not say, "You haven't expressed belief in the proper doctrine."

"What is preventing me from being baptized?" the eunuch asks.

And Phillip says, "Nothing." And it is done, then and there.

We need to examine our doctrine and our practices in the light of the words of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. We need to take the logs out of our own eyes before we have the right to help others "fix" their problems. Because if we don't, no matter how sincere we are in our apologies, no matter how much money we pay in reparation, it won't be enough, because we will keep on sinning.

So, let's take a short look at some of the things that I feel we need to explore before we start trying to patch up what we have.

First, I think we need to take a very clear look at our relationship to culture and society.

There are still many, many Christians, probably some of you in this congregation, who lament that the church does not have the clout it used to have in the circles of government in this nation and around the world.

Why? Why do we even care? We're trying to fix the evils that the government would do, and we haven't even fixed the evils we have done and are doing!

And we, as a church, can't even agree as to what those evils are!

One example: The United Church is in favour of outlawing conversion therapy, and conservative churches are fighting against outlawing it, in part because it's a revenue stream for some of their pastors, and in part because they still don't believe that LGBTQ2S people are made by God in God's image just as we are.

And it was the power of the church and the state working together that attempted to eradicate indigenous cultures in favour of European culture and Christianity. Even today, aid to indigenous persons in the form of scholarships and internships are about adapting them to modern culture, rather than recovering and protecting what was taken from them.

The colonial mindset, the doctrine of discovery, even the idea of ownership of land—all of these environmentally and culturally disastrous policies of European nations were spread throughout the globe by Christians, eager to convert the “heathens” to the “One True God.”

It's been that way since the Emperor Constantine made the Christian faith the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313. We are about 1700 years past the time for a divorce from a marriage that never should have happened.

We sometimes call the church “The Bride of Christ.” In currying favour with secular powers, we commit spiritual adultery.

Of course, the church, or some of us anyhow, believe we have a prophetic calling.

But if we study the prophets, we find very few of them were sent out into the world to condemn those outside Judaism. Jesus himself did not ever condemn the dominant religions, or the dominant culture.

He was sent to the nation of Israel, to the Jews, to bring them back to the basic tenets of their own religion.

So, if we are called to prophesy, let us prophesy first to our own peoples. The world will take care of itself. The world, if we are true to our faith and true to the calling of Jesus, will say to us, "What is preventing us from being baptized?"

We don't have to force ourselves into political discourse at all.

I am NOT saying here that we should not vote. I am not saying we should not bring up our individual concerns with our elected representatives. I am not saying we should not run for political office if that is our inclination

What we should not be doing is currying favour from our governments, asking them to pass or not pass legislation because it is the Christian thing to do. Instead, when we speak out, it should be as individuals speaking out for the rights of the disadvantaged.

Second, we need to take a long hard look at our doctrine.

Did you know that every ordained minister in the United Church of Canada has to profess "essential agreement" with the 20 articles of faith set out in the Basis of Union in 1925?

Were you aware that the vast majority of them have to lie to be ordained?

We have, as the foundation of our church, a document created by human minds a century ago.

Think of other areas of your life.

Do we drive the same cars as we did a century ago? Do cars today and cars then even have all that much in common? How many modern drivers would even be able to *start* a car manufactured in 1925?

Do we think the same? Is our education system the same? Do we communicate using the same channels?

No. Life has moved on.

But what, you say, has changed in the church? Isn't the whole idea of the church that God is unchanging?

I don't know if God changes or doesn't change. I would like to believe the first, because God is a living entity, and is the nature of living things that grow and change and adapt. This is as God made us, and God made us in God's image.

But church doctrine is NOT God. Church doctrine is a human construct, and as we learn more, we need to change our doctrines.

I'll go over just one single part of one single article that modern ministers have problems with.

"We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God's gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ."

Modern biblical criticism takes issue with the claim of infallibility. Modern ecumenism and interfaith dialogue take issue with the word "only."

We have moved on, but our doctrine has not. Another artefact of the 1925 articles of doctrine is its unflinching masculine language. Not only is God "He," but His worshippers are "men" and "sons" of God.

This perpetuates the myth that women are not made in the image of God, that women should not be ministers because God calls "men" to His service.

But we have the New Creed and the Song of Faith, don't we?

Yes, we do. And they are much more in line with today's faith than the 20 articles of doctrine. But the Manual of the United Church of Canada states clearly that "The 20 Articles of Doctrine; A Statement of Faith, 1940; A New Creed; and A Song of Faith are now recognized as standards subordinate to the primacy of scripture in the doctrine section of the Basis of Union."

In other words, modern understandings of God are subordinate to words penned by human beings long dead in cultures that no longer exist.

My own belief is that the doctrine section of the Basis of Union, and perhaps the Basis of Union itself, needs to be replaced as the foundation of the United Church of Canada, and we need to really wrestle with the issue of the place of scripture within our worship and lives.

And that brings me to the final “log” that we need to remove, and it’s tied up with the first two, and that is scripture. We need to examine our use of scripture as a guide for deeds.

Scripture has been used throughout the history of Christianity to justify such atrocities as the crusades, wars between Catholics and Protestants, forced conversions, slavery, residential schools, the incarceration and forced castration of gay men, conversion therapy... The list goes on.

Scripture, being as it is a human creation, is a dangerous guide of deeds. Many people believe that God has “inspired” scripture and it is therefore infallible. But scripture, as a form of history of the faith journey of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, was written by human hands, and literate and therefore educated human hands at that. Mostly male human hands.

So right away we know that a lot of the witness, a lot of the story, has been omitted.

It was not written in any languages spoken today. It was not written by a single person. Many parts of it claim to be authored by a person who was not, in fact, the author.

It has been collected, preserved, selected, translated, translated again, and again, and again, until what we have sometimes barely resembles what originally was.

It is the product of the cultures in which it was produced. And selected. And translated.

It is a collection of stories, poems, laws, and letters. We need to hear those stories, read those poems and letters, debate those laws. I am NOT in favour, as some are, of throwing out the Bible altogether.

Because that history is OUR history. But it is NOT our faith. Because faith, if it is to live, needs to change and grow as we learn.

I could go on about the foundations of our faith, and how some of them need to be destroyed utterly and some need to be modified substantially for Christianity, if not the church, to continue to grow and thrive.

But most of those foundations are tied to the three I have mentioned, which themselves are tied together.

Should the church be saved?

I don't have an answer to that at this point in time. I personally believe at this point the answer is "maybe." We have caused much hurt, but we are also the instigators of much that is good in our present society.

Can we, do it? Can we move house so that the foundations are set firmly on the Rock of Jesus, rather than the sands of culture? Amen.

***Hymn: "God of Freedom, God of Justice" VU 700**

- 1 God of freedom, God of justice,
 you whose love is strong as death,
 you who saw the dark of prison,
 you who knew the price of faith:
 touch our world of sad oppression
 with your Spirit's healing breath.

- 2 Rid the earth of torture's terror,
 you whose hands were nailed to wood;
 hear the cries of pain and protest,
 you who shed the tears and blood:
 move in us the power of pity
 restless for the common good.

- 3 Make in us a captive conscience
 quick to hear, to act, to plead;
 make us truly sisters, brothers
 of whatever race or creed:
 teach us to be fully human,
 open to each other's need.

Prayer for the Students of Kamloops Residential School

by Moderator Richard Bott, The United Church of Canada

O God, we are grieving.

O God, we are shocked.

O God, we are horrified.

But, God, if we truly listened, we can't be surprised.

The Elders and the Communities had already told
 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,

told the governments and the world,
the stories of the children, dead and buried,
unnoted by the settler systems,
but never ever forgotten by their siblings, their parents,
their communities.

We grieve for the Indigenous children,
taken from their homes and parents by the government,
handed over to the responsibility of the Christian church,
the children who died under its care,
never to be held by their families,
never to be returned to their communities—
not only the 215 children of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc
and other Indigenous communities along the west coast and interior
whose bodies have now been found
on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School grounds,
but all of those children
whose bodies have not yet been found
who died in any of Indian Residential Schools.

We grieve for the survivors of the Indian Residential Schools,
the children who did come home,
but were changed by their experience,
the children who grew up,
and have the trauma of remembering, again,
what happened to them.

Even as we give thanks for their families and communities,
who hold the stories of the children,
who have kept searching,
who keep searching,
we grieve that that search is even necessary,
that even one child was taken,
that even one child died,
that even one child's death went unnoted by the system.

Help us to stop, to sit in silence,
to remember the names we do not know.

May their spirits have peace,
and their bodies be brought home to their lands.

And God?

Help us to take this grief,
this shock,
this horror,
and turn it into right action—
action that works for right relations—
action that works for healing and justice and hope.

And, please,
 don't let those of us who are settlers
 and descendants of settlers,
 newcomers to this land,
 let the horror, the shock, and the grief
 just be an outpouring of words,
 or tears,
 or ineffectual handwringing.
 Let this be a moment that changes,
 a moment that transforms the brokenness,
 that we might walk in right relations,
 for the good of your children,
 for the good of your world.

Please, God.

These things we pray,
 in the name of the one who brought Creation into being,
 in the name of Jesus, our teacher and friend,
 in the name of the Holy Spirit,
 whose wings spread across the sky.
 Amen and amen.

And together with all Christianity, we pray the words that Jesus taught us,
 saying..

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 trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;
 and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.
 Forever and ever. Amen.

***Hymn: "God Weeps" MV 78**

1 God weeps at love withheld,
 At strength misused,
 At children's innocence abused,
 And till we change the way we love,
 God weeps.

- 2 God bleeds at anger's fist,
At trust betrayed,
At women battered and afraid,
And till we change the way we win,
God bleeds.
- 3 God cries at hungry mouths,
At running sores,
At creatures dying without cause,
And till we change the way we care,
God cries.
- 4 God waits for stones to melt,
For peace to seed,
For hearts to hold each other's need,
And till we understand the Christ,
God waits.

Blessing/Sending Forth:

Go and join Christ in the world, healing and speaking words of freedom,
witnessing to the sacred in the midst of life.

And may the grace of God, deeper than our imagination; the strength of
Christ, stronger than our need; and the communion of the Holy Spirit, richer
than our togetherness; guide and sustain us today and in all our tomorrows.
Amen.

***Parting Song "Don't Be Afraid" MV 90**

Don't be afraid.
My love is stronger,
My love is stronger than your fear,
Don't be afraid.
My love is stronger and I have promised,
Promised to be always near.

Postlude