



August 29, 2021

Melville United Church
300 St. Andrew Street West, Fergus, ON N1M 1N9
Mailing address: PO Box 41, Fergus, ON N1M2W7
519-843-1781

Team Ministry

Pastoral Care & Outreach	Ruth Cooke
Faith Formation & Youth	Martha Duncan
Ministry of Music Team	Suzanne Flewelling, Colleen Weber
Office Administrator	Lynda Rivet
Custodian	Robert Mitchell
Chair of Church Council	Allan Hons
Chair of Pastoral Care & Prayer Chain Captain	Alison Rainford
Office hours	9:00 a.m.-3:30 p.m. T., Th. & F.
E-Mail	secretary@melvilleunited.com
Web Site	www.melvilleunited.com
Pastoral Care Numbers	226-500-5004, 519-843-3841

**Melville United Church
Sunday, August 29, 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:

God's Spirit calls to our spirits, inviting us to worship.

God's Spirit calls to our spirits, inviting us to love.

God's Spirit calls to our spirits,
calling us by name,
calling us to grow in faith,
calling us to be made new.

We come to worship in this season of the Spirit.

Opening Prayer:

Wondrous God: you touch our lives with healing and with justice; new life is your gift. We praise you for the Good News which is ours through Jesus Christ. May this time of worship nourish us with your promise of meaning and purpose. May we be empowered to carry your goodness into the coming week. We pray in Jesus' name, our Source and our Saviour. Amen.

***Hymn: "Let All Things Now Living" VU 242**

- 1 Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving
to God our Creator triumphantly raise;
who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us,
by guiding us on to the end of our days.
God's banners are o'er us, pure light goes before us,
a pillar of fire shining forth in the night;
till shadows have vanished and darkness is banished,
as forward we travel from light into Light.

- 2 By law God enforces, the stars in their courses
and sun in its orbit obediently shine;
the hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains,
the depths of the ocean proclaim God divine.
We, too, should be voicing our love and rejoicing;
with glad adoration a song let us raise:
till all things now living unite in thanksgiving,
to God in the highest, hosanna and praise.

Prayer of Confession:

O God, we ask for living water, but dip our buckets into old wells. We offer dried crusts of and stale water, while complaining that no one will come to our banquet. Forgive us, O God, for our stale words, stale prayers, stale dreams. Forgive us, O God, for turning up our noses at your water, cool and crisp, that brings new life.

(We reflect in silence...)

Words of Assurance:

God the Creator bring you new life, forgives and redeems you. Take hold of this forgiveness, and live your lives in the spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Epistle Reading: Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:23-32

That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God!

Ministry of Music: “Touch of the Master’s Hand” by John Kramp
(Solo-Kim Wood/Piano-Suzanne Flewelling)

Meditation: "Heaven and Earth"

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

This summer has seen good natured scattered sign wars here in Ontario, but did you know that the first sign war I can find evidence of on the internet was between two churches?

Or at least it was a sign war. One self-professed atheist curmudgeon claims that it might have been a faked sign war, and he's probably right, but if it was faked, it might have started the trend with real signs. Anyhow, the signs:

Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church put up a sign that said: "All Dogs Go to Heaven".

Now if you Google "All Dogs Go to Heaven," you'll end up finding out more about a 1989 animated film. So it's likely the Catholic Church, if the sign wasn't faked, was simply playing off the movie title to gain some giggles from passersby.

Enter Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church. "Only humans go to heaven. Read the Bible."

The Catholics respond: "God loves all His creations, dogs included."

Presbyterians: "Dogs don't have souls. This is not open for debate."

Catholics: "Catholic dogs go to heaven. Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor."

Presbyterians: "Converting to Catholicism does not automatically grant your dogs a soul."

Catholics: "Free dog souls with conversion."

Presbyterians: "Dogs are animals. There aren't any rocks in heaven either."

Catholics: "All rocks go to heaven."

It's a funny series of signs poking fun at hard line Christian theology that claims that Christ only came to save human beings, and not dogs or rocks or trees.

But it has a very serious undertone to it, especially this year as we hear about and suffer through the effects of global warming, which may well end up making COVID look like the "good old days."

Our disrespect for the earth, our placing the comfort of a few human beings over the rights of dogs and cats and lions and tigers and bears and trees and whales and even rocks to exist has put not only them, but us, in deadly peril.

It may indeed be true that only humans have souls. Or it may not. The Bible certainly talks about souls, but I don't think it necessarily defines what a soul is. My own belief is that animals and humans aren't nearly as far apart as we humans tend to think we are. We are, after all, members of the animal kingdom. And we know for a fact that animals can form attachments to other animals, even those not of their own species. That they can care for their young and

sometimes for their elders and injured group members, that they can grieve when a loved one dies.

What is this, if not a manifestation of the One Love that is God?

The Bible tells us that humans are made in God's image. But does that mean that other animals, and the plants, and the earth itself are not?

True logic tells us that just because a fact is true, that does not necessarily mean that other facts are not true.

My whole series of summer sermons started with the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of a former residential school. Those graves exist, and that school existed, because we Christians had the towering pride to believe that only Christians were human, that only Christians were beloved of God.

Our climate crisis stems, in large part, from our collective unwillingness to see the earth as a living, breathing manifestation of God instead of a commodity that is ours for the destroying.

I'll leave you with another thought about dogs and heaven. This is a story adapted from a screenplay written by American writer Earnest Hammon Jr.:

A man and his dog were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead.

He remembered dying, and that the dog walking beside him had been dead for years. He wondered where the road was leading them.

After a while, they came to a high, white stone wall along one side of the road. It looked like fine marble. At the top of a long hill, it was broken by a tall arch that glowed in the sunlight.

When he was standing before it he saw a magnificent gate in the arch that looked like mother-of-pearl, and the street that led to the gate looked like pure gold. He and the dog walked toward the gate, and as he got closer, he saw a man at a desk behind the gate.

When he was close enough, he called out, "Excuse me, where are we?"

"This is Heaven, sir," the man answered.

"Wow! Would you happen to have some water?" the man asked.

"Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up."

The man gestured, and the gate began to open.

"Can my friend," gesturing toward his dog, "come in, too?" the traveler asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't allow pets."

The man thought a moment and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going with his dog.

After another long walk, and at the top of another long hill, he came to a dirt road leading through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. There was no fence.

As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book.

"Excuse me!" he called to the man. "Do you have any water?"

"Yeah, sure, there's a pump over there, come on in."

"How about my friend here?" the traveler gestured to the dog.

"There should be a bowl by the pump."

They went through the gate, and sure enough, there was an old-fashioned hand pump with a bowl beside it.

The traveler filled the water bowl and took a long drink himself, then he gave some to the dog.

When they were full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree.

"What do you call this place?" the traveler asked.

"This is Heaven," he answered.

"Well, that's confusing," the traveler said. "The man down the road said that was Heaven, too."

"Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell."

"Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?"

"No, we're just happy that they screen out the folks who would leave their best friends behind."

I'm not dead yet, so I don't know the full truth about what awaits. But I do know that if there are no dogs or cats or other animals, no trees or flowers or birds or running water or rocks; if all there is are streets paved of gold and people in flowing white robes playing harps, then I've probably gone the wrong way.

After doing further investigation, I came to the conclusion that the sign war I just told you about is almost certainly fake. If you look up Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church, you'll find out that it's in Beda, Kentucky, which is a small hamlet in Ohio County. On the internet, you can look up just about anything, and if there's an Our Lady of Martyrs church in Ohio County, I can't find it. Certainly there are no Catholic Churches of that name within sign war distance.

So it's very likely faked.

I'm guessing that it was done to poke fun at Christians for believing in an afterlife at all, by atheists who mock us for believing in an "invisible sky fairy."

The meme is kind of funny, in a thought provoking way.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees in Chapter 22 of Matthew, however, weren't trying to be funny when they mocked Jesus, and they weren't trying to provoke anyone to think. They were trying to make Jesus say something that would turn his followers away, or get him into trouble with the Romans.

To recap: first the Pharisees came with the Herodians, and asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. It was supposed to be a lose/lose question. If Jesus answered, "No, it is not lawful," he would be arrested by the representatives of the emperor. If he said, "Yes," the Zealots amongst his following would be angered.

The Pharisees, in asking their question, were conflating civic and religious matters in order to trap Jesus. Instead of answering yes or no, however, Jesus points out that the emperor's head is pictured on the coin, and thus in the civic realm. Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God what belongs to God.

The Sadducees, likewise, weren't really interested in an answer to their question. They didn't care whose wife she would be in the resurrection because they didn't believe in the resurrection at all! Like the creator of the sign meme, they were trying to show Jesus' followers how ridiculous the idea of an afterlife is.

And once again, Jesus avoids the trap and astounds his listeners.

Jesus looks them in the eye and says, "You're wrong. You really don't understand anything. Heaven isn't like things are now here on earth. People won't get married, because they won't need to get married."

The Sadducees had described a case of what is called Levirate marriage, where the brother of a dead man is obliged to marry his widow, both to preserve the family line of the dead man and to keep land within the family. But there is no need in heaven for this type of marriage, because with no death, there is no need to preserve what is lost in the event of death.

We can take our cues from Jesus when we are confronted with a world where many think belief in God is belief in an "invisible sky fairy," and that there is nothing after death at all.

They understand neither the nature of God, nor the nature of belief.

As for belief, it's true that we cannot prove the existence of God, but neither can they prove that God *does not* exist. Atheism, therefore, is a belief system as surely as Christianity or any other religion is. I have no quarrel with any atheist of goodwill, but I simply don't follow their belief system.

As for Christianity, in my opinion, Christians should not view God as an "invisible sky fairy" who is "up there" somewhere and grants wishes if He feels we've been good enough. God is the

spirit who moves in and around us, and whose image is glimpsed in every living thing, including the rocks themselves.

And heaven is not a reward for good behaviour. Heaven is what happens when love underpins every action. Which definitely means there are dogs in heaven. Right?

Heaven isn't just about punishment and rewards for deeds done or left undone in our short time here on earth. Heaven is about the peace and health and prosperity that comes from being loved by God, and by returning that love.

And God is God of the living, not of the dead.

We Christians live our lives knowing that we are not alone, that we are loved, and that nothing we or anyone else can do can separate us from that love—that is the strength that is the very stuff of our lives.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen!

***Hymn: "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" VU 651**

- 1 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
 pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
 hold me with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
 feed me till I want no more,
 feed me till I want no more.

- 2 Open now the crystal fountain,
 whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
 lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,
 be thou still my strength and shield,
 be thou still my strength and shield.

- 3 When I tread the verge of Jordan,
 bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
 land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, songs of praises
 I will ever give to thee,
 I will ever give to thee.

Prayers for the People

God, whose glory the heavens are telling, we praise you for starlight and moonlight and for the joys of sun on the water, the feel of sand between bare toes, picnics and rainbows, and friends for celebration.

We praise you for your continuing presence in a world where wealth has so much to say, where the wicked prosper, relationships go sour, and hearts and dreams are broken.

In laughter and tears alike we praise you.

We pray for the peace of the world, O God, and for the peace that only you can give—not only the absence of conflicts and battle, but also the fullness of life that is prosperity for all, goodwill among neighbours, and welcome for every outsider.

Here us now as we name the situations and nations for which we seek your Shalom:

For our country, Canada, as we head into a federal election. May all of those running seek justice and prosperity for all Canadians and not just a few. May we work diligently towards reconciliation with our Indigenous Peoples, loving into being a future where all have a place.

We pray for those living in places beset by war. Especially today we pray for the people of Afghanistan, those who are fleeing as well as those who remain behind. We pray for their safety, and that you might be present among them, guiding them towards a future of hope.

We pray for those in refugee camps everywhere. God, may we not let the news headlines, full of the latest crisis, drive from our minds the people and places for which we prayed in the past.

For Melville United Church, we pray that as we go forward, we might envision a future where we can fulfill our commission to spread your Good News to Fergus and beyond.

For our families, friends, and ourselves. Be with those who are experiencing hardship, or who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Hold them in the palms of your hands, so that they might know that they are not alone.

We gather these and all our prayers, those spoken aloud and those too deep for words, and give them into your loving care, O God.

And together we pray the words that Jesus taught us so long ago:

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: "We Shall Go Out with Hope of Resurrection" VU 586**

- 1 We shall go out with hope of resurrection;
 we shall go out, from strength to strength go on;
 we shall go out and tell our stories boldly;
 tales of a love that will not let us go.
 We'll sing our songs of wrongs that can be righted;
 we'll dream our dreams of hurts that can be healed;
 we'll weave a cloth of all the world united
 within the vision of new life in Christ.
- 2 We'll give a voice to those who have not spoken;
 we'll find the words for those whose lips are sealed;
 we'll make the tunes for those who sing no longer,
 expressive love alive in every heart.
 We'll share our joy with those who still are weeping,
 raise hymns of strength for hearts that break in grief,
 we'll leap and dance the resurrection story,
 including all in circles of our love.

Blessing/Sending Forth:

Be strong and of good courage, do not be afraid: for it is the Lord your God who goes with you.
 God will not fail you or forsake you. Amen.

***Parting Song "Go Now in Peace" (Price/Besig)**

Postlude