



August 8, 2021

Melville United Church
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**Melville United Church
Sunday, August 8, 2021**

* *Congregation please stand as you are able.*

Bold print invites congregational response.

Presiding today: Ruth Cooke

Welcome & Announcements

There will be a congregational meeting held August 17 at 7pm via Zoom. The purpose of the meeting is to approve the hiring of a new full-time minister for our congregation.

If you are unable to use the Zoom program and would like to join another member of the congregation who is Zoom proficient, please contact Lorna Bevcar. If you would like some extra practice or Zoom training before the meeting, then please contact Lorna once more and council will arrange for some assistance.

Sharing the Light

Prelude/Centering Time

Call to Worship:

From the high points of our lives to the valleys of despair

We come to worship our God.

From field and forest, from lakeside and city

We come to worship our God.

Young and old, rich and poor

We come to worship our God.

Opening Prayer:

Holy God, Creator of the Universe and giver of all good things, we come this morning to worship and learn. Help us to hear your word clearly amidst the noise of our world, so that we might worship you and you alone. Amen.

***Hymn: "All Creatures of Our God and King"**

VU 217

1 All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing:
 hallelujah, hallelujah!
Bright burning sun with golden beam,
soft shining moon with silver gleam,
 sing praises, sing praises,
 hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

2 O rushing winds and breezes soft,
O clouds that ride the winds aloft,
 sing praises, hallelujah!
O rising morn, in praise rejoice;
O lights of evening, find a voice:
 sing praises, sing praises,
 hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

- 3 Earth, ever fertile, day by day
brings forth rich blessings on our way:
sing praises, hallelujah!
The flowers and fruits that verdant grow,
let them God's glory also show:
sing praises, hallelujah!
hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!
- 4 And everyone of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part:
sing praises, hallelujah!
All who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God and yield up all your care:
sing praises, hallelujah!
hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!
- 5 Let all things their Creator bless,
and worship God in humbleness:
sing praises, hallelujah!
Praise God eternal, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, three in one:
sing praises, hallelujah!
hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

Prayer of Confession:

You asked for my hands, that you might use them for your purpose. I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them for the work was hard.

You asked for my mouth, to speak out against injustice. I gave you a whisper, that I might not be accused.

You asked for my eyes, to see the pain of poverty. I closed them, for I did not want to see.

You asked for my life, that you might work through me. I have a small part, that I might not get too involved.

O God, forgive me for my calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient for me to do so, only in those places where it is safe to do so, and only with those who make it easy to do so.

O God, forgive me, renew me, send me out as a usable instrument, that I might take seriously the meaning of your cross.

(We reflect in silence...)

Words of Assurance:

The Lord God is merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true, showing mercy, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

First Reading: Exodus 23:14-19a

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt.

No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my festival remain until the morning.

The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

Second Reading: Matthew 5:23-26

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God!

Ministry of Music: “Jesus Shall Reign” by John Hatton, played by Colleen Weber

Meditation: “Overturning Tables II: Rethinking Our Priorities”

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

A philosophy professor stood in front of her class one day and pulled out a large, empty jar which in which she proceeded to place a number of rocks. She added rocks right up to the brim of the jar, then asked her students, “Is the jar full?”

The students agreed that the jar was full.

She then brought out some aquarium gravel, and proceeded to pour it into the jar, gently shaking it until it had settled between all of the spaces in the rocks. “Is the jar full now?” she asked.

Again, the students agreed that it was.

She pulled out a container of fine sand, and poured it in. The sand settled in the spaces between the gravel. “Is the jar full now?”

“Yes!” said the students. “Now it is definitely full.”

She then pulled out a pitcher of water, and poured it carefully into the jar.

“NOW the jar is full,” she said.

She then pulled out another large jar, and filled it with water.

“Is this jar full?” she asked.

The students, thinking it was a trick question, said, “No!”

But when the professor went to put in just one rock, the jar overflowed. Yes, it had been full.

The professor went on to explain to her students that the jar was a metaphor for life. And the rocks, the gravel, the sand, the water—these were the “stuff” that fills everyday life. Money, family, tasks big and small, things expensive and inexpensive, food—whatever takes up our time, our energy, our lives—these are the rocks and gravel and sand and water.

Only these things are not of equal importance. The “rocks” are the important things in life, with the gravel, the sand, the water just being fillers.

If we put the rocks in the jar first, if we prioritize what is important in life, there will be plenty of room for everything else.

If we fail to prioritize, the water, the sand, and the gravel will flow into our life jar and crowd out the things we feel are important.

I’m sure the professor was trying to make the point that if her students took the time to schedule their studying, which they presumably held as being very important, that not only would the studying get done, but there would be time for all of the other things that make up university life.

For those of us not in university the lesson holds true as well. Whatever we decide is important, whether it is family, or the church, or growing our new business, or saving for a long-desired goal, if we schedule and plan for it and place it in our jar first, it will happen. If we forget to prioritize, if we don’t budget time or money or energy to go towards our goal, our lives will fill up with the less important things, and our goals will slip by.

For most years during the past couple of decades, I’ve taken part in an exercise in insanity called “National Novel Writing Month,” Nanowrimo for short. The goal of this particular month is to write a fifty thousand word novel, start to finish, in 30 days. Not just any thirty days, but in November, when Americans have Thanksgiving, folks are preparing for Christmas, and students are preparing for first semester exams.

Most years, I haven't achieved my goal of writing fifty thousand words in a month. Some years, I've written only a couple of thousand, some years, ten or twenty thousand. I'm not alone—of the hundreds of thousands of participants, most fail to get even that much written.

But it can be done. For at least two of those years, I've "won" Nanowrimo, writing fifty thousand words or more in the space of thirty days.

When I look back on what I did differently during those two years as opposed to the years where I failed to make the grade, only one thing stands out.

I wrote every single day. I made the writing that novel a priority, and every morning, I'd sit down and write something. Sometimes, only a hundred words, sometimes, a couple of thousand. One or two days, I sat and wrote in several thirty minute sprints throughout the day, adding five or even ten thousand words to my total. (For comparison, this sermon is about 2,500 words.)

I had decided that one of the "rocks" in my life jar that month would be my novel, and I put it in the jar first.

Every single one of us, every single day, faces choices about what to do with our day. And our energy. And our money.

And if we don't have goals, or if we fail to prioritize our goals and put them first, we'll fill up our time and our budgets and our lives with the things that are easiest, which are almost always the things we've always done without thinking about them.

Let's think first about money. I think a majority of people here today, if not all of us, would say that supporting the church is an important part of our budget. But does it come first?

I know myself that fear leads me to pay all my other bills first, and give what's left over to the church.

The problem is, a lot of times there isn't anything left over. Parkinson's law states that "work expands to fill the time available." A variation on this theme, often stated by my dad, is that "stuff expands to fill the space available, plus ten percent." The budget version would be that expenses expand to use up the amount of money available. Plus ten percent or more.

If we don't budget for what we consider to be important, and budget for it first, it's highly likely that when the time comes, the money won't be there to honour our commitments.

As an institution, the church also faces that problem. If we don't ask ourselves what our purpose is, what our priorities are, then our money and our energy will go where it has always gone.

My own personal observation is that this failure to set priorities, this failure to have any purpose beyond perpetuating what has always been, is the biggest, maybe even the ONLY reason for the decline of the church.

Because there *are* churches that are growing and thriving. Some of them have conservative theologies, some have liberal theologies, some have ministers that don't believe in God at all! Some of those congregations have a call to minister to the poor in other countries, some have a call to minister to the poor in their own neighbourhood, some feel a call to pastoral care, some feel a call to asking intellectually challenging questions, some feel a call to evangelize the rich, some feel a call to grow in numbers and have those growing numbers put more money on the offering plate, some feel the call to have television or YouTube ministries, some are intent on maintaining, repairing, and building their church buildings.

The priorities of these churches are diverse, and I'm not saying that all of these priorities are equally in tune with the gospel or that they are good priorities. The point is that growing churches, thriving churches, have priorities and they set aside both money and personnel to make their priorities happen.

I'm currently in the process of a drastic life change. My life for the past ten or more years has been centered around my youngest son, who is severely autistic. I've prioritized being available to drive him to and from all of his programs, and to be home to watch him if he wasn't in a program while his father Bill was at work. Lesser but still important "rocks" in my life were supporting my daughter as she became an independent adult, and doing urgent tasks for Bill, usually things like driving his elderly mother to appointments and so on. During all of this time, Bill has supported me, providing me with the majority of my income.

But this past June, Bill retired. On June 23, Bill's mother Fleur passed away. My daughter is now firm in her marriage and her adult life and is becoming more and more capable of handling the occasional crises. It is no longer necessary for me to devote the majority of my time to my family, though of course they remain important.

And the main part of my income, as of the end of August, will be cut off.

So I started a new business, reselling things I've been given, that I already had, or that I bought very inexpensively and can sell on Ebay for more money.

It's a challenge. Besides learning the ins and outs of how to be a reseller, I also have to learn to reallocate my time so that I do indeed have the time to grow my business. And of course I've had to learn about finance.

On the recommendation of a couple of other resellers, I picked up a book called, "Profit First," by Mike Michalowicz. There are a lot of books about finance, both for individuals and businesses, and I've read a large number of them.

But Mike's book is the first one I've read that states the obvious. If you're in business to make a profit, then the traditional formula of income minus expenses equals profit is backwards.

It should be income minus profits equals expenses.

In other words, you budget for the profit first, and if there isn't enough left over to pay for your expenses, then perhaps cutting expenses should be your first line of defense.

Because if you're in business to make a profit, then cutting profit means cutting out the very reason for the existence of your business.

After reading that, my brain kind of exploded. Not literally, of course.

But I thought of all the churches I know that struggle to meet their expenses. And I remembered all the church budgets I've seen. The ones with the top lines being "Salaries and benefits," "Mortgage," "Building Maintenance," and "Security."

And what does it say about our priorities when the line for mission, if there is one, is way down at the bottom and amounts to a few hundred dollars?

Or the line for Sunday School no longer even exists, because "there isn't one?" How can there be one, how can one be grown, if there is no budget for it?

And let's talk about that "salaries and benefits" line.

How much of the staff time goes to maintaining what is, and how much goes to growing the church's mission?

These are questions that need to be asked.

What are our priorities as a church, and how are those priorities reflected in our budgets and in our calendars?

I chose this week's gospel reading with care. This whole series of sermons grew out of the existential crisis within me caused by the discovery of the unmarked graves of indigenous children in Kamloops. And I have learned that the Roman Catholic church, which pledged to raise 25 million dollars to compensate survivors, was able to only raise about 4 million dollars. In 2015, courts absolved them of having to pay the rest.

In the same time frame that it took them to raise the 4 million dollars for residential school survivors, the Catholic Church has dedicated over 300 million dollars for buildings.

In my own United Church congregation, in the 30 years I've been a member, this is the first year that there have been donations made directly to the Healing Fund, although we have met our Mission and Service Fund goal most years, and some of that goes to the Healing Fund as well. The total amount was \$215. Hopefully that will lead to more donations, but it is to be noted that this same congregation, when faced with a \$50,000 cost of putting in a new lift, was able to raise the money in less than a week.

I'm not saying a new lift isn't important. Indeed, it's a vital part of our ministry to maintain our building in a manner that allows all people, including those with disabilities, to participate equally. Building funds *are* important.

However, we must be mindful of this important piece of scripture that I read this morning where Jesus tells us that reconciling with our sisters and brothers when we have done wrong is even *more* important than worshipping God! Because whatever we do to other human beings,

we do to God, and until we have made peace with those we have wronged, we cannot truly be at peace with God.

I know for myself, the biggest obstacle I have to putting my offerings first is not lack of will, but fear. If I budget for God first, will I have enough left over to pay all my bills?

I think the same is true of churches. I'm willing to bet at least a few of you are thinking, "If we put lots of money towards whatever mission we decide on, will we have enough money to keep on existing?" Because we're barely making it now!

I have two answers to that.

First, what is the point of existence? If we as a church have no calling or mission, why are we here? If I as an individual have no higher purpose in life than to pay my bills, what is the point of my life?

I like to think that we as a church have a calling, and that I as an individual have one too. And that calling should be reflected in our budget and in our actions.

Second, I am very slowly learning to trust. There have been many times in the past when I have struggled to pay my bills. Sometimes I've received letters threatening to cut off my service. I've got student loans in collections, I've declared bankruptcy. I have reason to fear.

But I am slowly finding out that giving first fruits to God has an added benefit, other than the warm, fuzzy feeling I get when I send that e-transfer to the church.

It focusses me on what is important in my life, and I end up making better choices with the money that's left over in my budget. Since I've started, even irregularly, putting money in the offering plate, I've stopped receiving collection letters. My student loans are on a repayment schedule. I've stopped paying NSF fees.

The fear is a lie. There is enough. Time, money, whatever. There is always enough.

We just need to remember to put the important things first in our lives and our budgets, and the rest will fit into the cracks.

Amen.

***Hymn: "Seek Ye First the Kingdom" VU 356**

- 1 Seek ye first the kingdom of God
 and God's righteousness,
 and all these things shall be added unto you.
 Hallelu, hallelujah.

- 2 Ask and it shall be given unto you;
 seek and you shall find;
 knock and the door shall be opened unto you.
 Hallelu, hallelujah.

- 3 We do not live by bread alone,
 but by every word
 that proceeds from the mouth of God.
 Hallelu, hallelujah.

Prayers for the People

(adapted from a prayer on dailyeffectiveprayer.org by Daniel—Prayer Warrior)

O God of all, we gather together and come in in the wonderful and powerful name of Jesus the Christ.

You have promised that where two or more are gathered there You will be in the midst of us.

Heavenly God, we place our priorities in front of You right now.

If there is anything we need to change, help us change it.

Help us to live a life in which our priorities are balanced in Your sight. A life where we invest not only in the present but also in the future that is to come.

Life is about the here and now but it is also about eternity. What is done here on earth affects Heaven.

We are thankful for the possessions You have given us, but we recognize that they are temporary.

We are thankful for the things we own but we are more grateful for the people who walk with us on this earthly journey, as well as those who have walked before us and have shown us the way in faithfulness and love.

Lord, please help live our lives in your service and to organize our priorities wisely. Help us make it our priority to love one another as you have loved us. To reconcile and make new our relationships with those we have harmed. To share the blessings you have given us with the poor and needy.

Help us to organize our priorities around things that will further Your Realm on earth as in Heaven.

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: "As Those of Old Their First-Fruits Brought" VU 518**

- 1 As those of old their first-fruits brought
 of vineyard, flock, and field
 to God, the giver of all good,
 the source of bounteous yield;
 so we today our first-fruits bring:
 the wealth of this good land,
 of farm and market, shop and home,
 of mind and heart and hand.

- 2 A world in need now summons us
 to labour, love, and give,
 to make our life an offering
 to God, that all may live.
 The church of Christ is calling us
 to make the dream come true:
 a world redeemed, by Christ-like love,
 all life in Christ made new.

- 3 With gratitude and humble trust
 we bring our best to you,
 not just to serve your cause, but share
 your love with neighbours too.
 O God, who gave yourself to us
 in Jesus Christ, your son,
 help us to give ourselves each day
 until life's work is done.

Blessing/Sending Forth:

Let us go forth giving thanks and glory to God,
 Whose power, working in us,
 Can do infinitely more than we can imagine.
 Glory to God from generation to generation,
 In the church, and in Christ Jesus,
 Forever and ever. Amen.

***Parting Song "Go Now in Peace. Guided by the Light" (Price/Besig) MV 211**

Postlude