

Worship with McClure United Church

June 28, 2020

Welcome & Announcements

Welcome to worship with McClure United Church – it is great to have you join us.

McClure United Church is located on Treaty 6 land and the traditional homeland of the Metis and McClure is an affirming ministry of the United Church and therefore we do our best – with God’s help - to be welcoming and a place of belonging for all people.

Today Laura, Brian and I will lead you - in what we hope will be - a gift of worship for you. Kristie Elliott will be offering the gift of music and Kent Mohn is the scripture reader today.

Can you believe it is the end of June already and we are one whole week into summer? This shift in seasons means that it is time to say thank you to Brian Walton who has been ministering with us at McClure these past two years. Brian’s ministry with us has been marked by wise sermons, challenging conversations, deep caring, good learning and lots of fun. We wish him well in retirement and hope that he and Victoria will visit often. During these quieter summer months Laura and I will be taking some holiday time. I will be away most of July and Laura most of August. Please contact the church office if you are in need of pastoral care and your call will be forwarded to the appropriate person as soon as possible.

As families enjoy the lazy days of summer Laura will be letting go of all the Children, Youth and Friday coffee zoom times. Starting in July Laura will be hosting a “coffee in the parking lot on Fridays at 10am” – please bring your own chair and coffee and remember to physical distance. That starts this coming Friday. You need to call her and let her know you are coming.

I also wanted to remind you that that there is a group of folks working on figuring out how we might worship in our building again – it is a complicated task and so please be patient as they navigate information and regulations that seem to be changing daily. These good folks have a huge job and I am so grateful for their good work to keep us all safe. God bless this little group.

Those are our announcements for today.

Candle Lighting

Many of us are missing our McClure building worship space – I know if I close my eyes I can see Elin at the piano and Shirley at the organ or the Sacred sounds band adjusting their mics and sipping on their coffees. If I look up - I see one of the sound booth dudes counting heads and adjusting the sound. I see ushers - checking the doors to make sure

no one is standing alone and that everyone has a seat. I see Fergus dancing in the back and the youth group hanging over the balcony and children asking parents when does Rainbow village start. From where I sit I get to see - wonderful you.

So as we begin to worship this day – in a verity of different places - I invite you to imagine that holy place – that space in your sanctuary where you feel at home.

Where you feel open to hear God’s words of challenge and love.

Perhaps it is the back few chairs of the sanctuary that feel like home to you. Maybe you like to sit near the choir or band so you get the best sound. Maybe you sit closer to the preacher so you can catch every word. Maybe you like to sit in the middle so you are surrounded by your church family. Maybe you are new to church and haven’t found the spot that works for you – I invite you to imagine a place were questions are welcome and answers are few, were there is welcome and belonging – where you can be you.

I **light this candle** which reminds us that wherever we are, who ever we are, we have a home in the light of God’s love.

Prayer

God, we give you thanks for the gifts of summer – green grass, trees in leaf, flowers in bloom, growing gardens. We give you thanks for holiday time, special visits from family and friends, and all the refreshment found in warm breezes and gentle rains. Keep us open to the beauty that surrounds us. Help us to see your grace, and nurture in creation that we might know your love for us. And now we pray that this time of worship might create in us the faith and hope we need for the living of these days. As followers of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Scripture Philippians 1:3-8

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

Reflection

St. Paul was in the habit of writing letters to the small Christian communities that were gradually populating the ancient world. These little churches existed in places such as Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, and Philippi. Paul’s letters were saved and collected into the books which comprise the latter part of our Bible: books such as Romans, Ephesians,

Corinthians, and Philippians. I could have chosen almost any of these writings to shape this morning's sermon. I settled on the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

His salutation provides a framework for what I would like to say today. Paul begins by using two words which are at the heart of Christian community. He begins, 'Grace and Peace to you.' Grace, unmerited acts of goodness; and peace, living in right relationship. He then goes on to describe himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, and the people of the church, as saints. From there he offers words of thanksgiving; observations about their life together; and prayers for the future of the church. This framework shapes what I want to say to you this morning, so let us begin.

Grace and peace to you my friends – might you offer and receive unmerited acts of goodness; may peace mark all of your relationships. Over the last two years you have renewed me by inviting me to reflect, with you, upon the teachings of Christ as I have understood them, and in doing so I have grown in my relationship with you, the saints of McClure United Church.

I want to thank you for revealing the Holy One to me. I know that many of you have assumed that I have, in some way, brought God to you; but surely God is made known most clearly in relationship and so, I believe we have met God and animated the God-power in one another. In the same way that you have faithfully joined me on Sunday morning, I have relied on you to show me God, and you have. You have shown me the God of justice in your work with CHEP, the Lighthouse, with refugees, and through your bold support of the LGBTQ+ community and so much more. You have shown me the God of peace as we sat together in spiritual conversation groups listening for how God is incarnated in each soul; you have shown me the peace present at the front of the sanctuary we honoured and remembered loved ones in the All Saints and Blue Christmas services. You have shown me the God of compassion by welcoming strangers, making clear and dedicated space for children and youth, by embracing the bereaved and providing the comfort of rituals, warm hugs and coffee. You have shown me the God of courage when you have lived with determination despite a cancer diagnosis, when you confessed your struggle with racism, when you showed resilience in the face of vandalism.

I also want to say thank you for how you know God, for your liberality. One of the hallmarks of my personality is that I am a 'doubter.' It is a strange characteristic for a preacher, but it has caused me to ask many questions about my faith. I can neither relinquish my personal experience of God, nor reject the world explained by science and technology. As a result, my faith has had to grow in a garden of doubt. It has meant that I must declare that there is a God in relationship, even when I am not sure that God is in heaven. It has meant that prayer is absolutely essential to my faith, even though I doubt if God will answer my personal requests. It has meant that I believe nothing can separate

me from the love of God even though I am not convinced that there is a heaven. In former centuries, I might have been burned at the stake, most certainly excommunicated; in the 21st century I could have simply been abandoned by more doctrinaire Christians – but you did not abandon me. I pray that my doubts have not damaged your faith for I am not ‘the’ authority, only a fellow questioner before the great mystery of life.

Following St. Paul’s example, I would like to make a couple of observations about life at McClure. You are a people of great intellectual integrity. I have learned through our books - studies which predate my arrival by decades - that you ask tough questions and wrestle with the ambiguities of faith and life while remaining committed to the way of Jesus. You have demanded a faith that meets your life experience. Even though science and technology have required that you altar some of your ideas; you have refused to let science take your faith away. It is a fact attested to by the large number of engineers, scientists and other inquirers who are, or have been, part of this congregation. They show that intellectual rigour does not lead them away from The Holy, but toward it. Thank you for such an honest witness to faith. And thank you also, to those who live primarily out of intuition. Your faith is equally rigorous yet you more easily entertain ambiguity and embrace mystery, which is surely necessary if one is to truly experience God.

You are also a place of innovation. In the early 80’s Victoria and I spent some time worshipping at Walter Murray while I worked as a chaplain. You were on the cutting edge of being church – resisting the confines of a building yet imagining a place of community for seniors knowing through both pursuits that the church is not a building, the church is people! Your sponsorship of refugees was a model for every other refugee committee in the province and your generous budget for this work was a sign that God’s mission was not was not only for domestic purposes. In these Covid times you have continued that mission by organizing a series of phone calls to over 400 households in the congregation while simultaneously preparing countless bag lunches for distribution by the Lighthouse. Even in the considering of reopening you have been insistent in maintaining safety for the community you created in the tower and at Amy’s House.

I would like to conclude with two prayers for your future. Doug Hall, my first theology professor, predicted in his countless books that Christianity as we know it will end. He suggested that Christians would eventually become a minority in the culture, such as they were in St. Paul’s era – leaven in the loaf, salt in the meat. Being a minority is not easy – you stand out as different. Your friends don’t understand why you have to miss a Sunday morning golf date to attend church. They may not understand the money and time that you devote to Christian community. You might be thought of as a zealot or simply old-fashioned and naïve. Your belief in the way of Jesus might put you on a

different side of a political debate, or a social issue, or a racist joke. Increasingly – if you wish to be part of the Christian church, part of the way of Jesus – you will likely stick out, perhaps be made fun of, and maybe even be shunned. If I have learned anything from being in your midst, it is that it is worth the cost. Even our modest attempts to be Christian community are so much more satisfying than most of what the culture has to offer us. And so I pray for you – that you keep the faith, that you make the effort, and that you experience the blessings.

My final prayer arises out of the other hardship of the Christian life. It is one thing to endure a culture that scoffs at us, but quite another to face the Jesus who challenges us. Jesus teaches that if we are to pursue his way, we must relinquish our culture's obsession with individuality and security. We live in a society where we are constantly bombarded with the message that if we only had enough money, it would solve every personal and societal ill. The message is legion: money will make us happy; self-improvement is the way to contentment; living with security eliminates risk. Jesus says, 'don't believe it' – personal happiness will not come without friends and the extension of empathy and care to the neighbour; true security will not arise without learning how to share our resources and celebrate our differences; peace can only arise from acts of genuine forgiveness, reconciliation and a commitment to God's commonwealth for all. It can be easy to say 'yes Jesus' but act as if we don't believe him. It is easy to allow the love of 'things' and the pursuit of success to define our days. As a result I pray for you – and for myself – that we might be able to find the courage to live the faith we profess. To do so we need each other in ways that we have not yet asked of one another. We need to talk and pray together and make relationship the centre of life together and justice the focus of our work in the world. May this Jesus, who has inspired us, also empower us in this struggle.

And so the end of regularly preaching from this pulpit has arrived for me – I thank you for the gift you have given me. I affirm your commitment to the way of Jesus. I promise to hold you in prayer. Amen.

Prayers

And now we gather our hearts together in prayer...

Opening ourselves to God's abundant love and grace – allowing it to fill our hearts... to fill our whole being.

So let's begin our prayers with gratitude...

Thank you God for your love and for all the ways your love guides us, strengthens us and grounds us

Thank you for the blessings in our lives – the obvious ones – like family, friends, and all of the things that bring us comfort and joy...

And the less obvious ones – the ones we may not even notice – and the ones we may not recognize as blessings in this moment.

Let's take a moment now in quiet to give thanks for those gratuities that are sitting on our hearts...

On this last Sunday of Brian's ministry among us, we also offer deep gratitude for all of the ways he has blessed our community.. for his wisdom, his gentleness, his strength and all of the ways he has inspired us in our time of renewal. We pray he will feel our love move with him as he lives into retirement. May he truly feel our gratitude for all he has shared with us and the ways he has touched our lives.

And we turn our attention now to our prayers of care and concern... for the world, for our church and for ourselves.

We continue to pray for all of those so impacted by COVID... for those who are sick, for their family and friends... for those who are isolated and desperately lonely... for those who have had to cancel special plans and celebrations... for those who are feeling the ache of not being able to hug their children, grandchildren and other special people in their lives... for those who have continued to work over the past few months and for those just returning to work in a new way... may all of these feel your loving presence surround them... may they feel strengthened and supported by that love and by the care of others. And may we all continue to seek ways to reach out and offer that care in whatever ways we are able... we all need your courage, wisdom and strength as we continue to move forward into the unknown.

And we pray for everyone who lives with the trauma and pain of racism... for those who live it every day, for those being challenged to learn and understand their own role in racist structures, ideas, thoughts and acts. We pray for strength to stand up, be heard and move forward... we pray for courage to show up and speak up for those who need us... for the wisdom to learn and discern our role in making this world... your world, God, a safe place for everyone.

And we pray for all your people God who are struggling right now.. for those are sick... those struggling with their mental health... those who are grieving, lonely, worried and afraid... for those fearful of their future – of the unknown.. those struggling with addictions... we hold all your people God in love and lift them to know, trusting in your presence and in the hope you offer. As prayed by St. Francis of Assisi.. .may we all be instruments of your peace... your love... your forgiveness... your hope.. your light... your joy.

And we take another moment now in quiet to offer our own prayers of care and concern to you now.

All of these prayers we offer to you now in the name of Jesus the Christ... who taught us to pray this way:

Our Father/Mother, who aren't 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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing

Go forth and be the church of Jesus Christ in the world. Know that the God-power which is love inhabits you and affirms you and calls you forth into the world to be agents of love to neighbours and strangers alike. Now may God, the Great and Creating One; Jesus the Saving Son; and the Comforting Holy Spirit surround you and hold you, this day and always. Amen.