

“From You Comes My Praise: Guide My Steps”

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Welcome/Announcements

(voice over) We welcome you to this time of worship and as we do so, we acknowledge that McClure United Church stands on treaty 6 territory and homeland of the Metis Nation. We pay our respect to elders both past and present, wherever we find ourselves today. We also acknowledge our commitment as an Affirming Ministry of the United Church of Canada as we strive to be an open-minded, inclusive and welcoming place of worship. It is our hope that no matter your age, race, class, ability, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, you will feel the warmth and blessing of God's love today. And we give thanks to God for this opportunity to gather together for worship, reflection, song and prayer. May you feel the God's blessing upon you today.

Good morning and welcome to worship with us here today. Today is the 5th Sunday in this season of Easter... a season of new. I am grateful to be on this journey with you – as we open our selves to God's dream... as we seek the courage, strength and resiliency needed in as we dare to dance for hope, justice and love.

And I do have a couple of announcements for you today. First a reminder of our AGM on Sunday, May 16 at 1pm and also the AGM for McClure Place and McClure Foundation one day earlier on May 15 at 1pm. Both of those are via Zoom and you can find the Zoom connection information on our website and on the website for McClure Place. Please contact us or the Place if you have any questions.

As you know the Outreach Committee hosted a Food Bank drop off in the church parking lot on Friday. Thank you so much to everyone for volunteering to help collect and to those who dropped off. Your generosity will make a difference to many in our city who are in need of food right now.

And the outreach committee continues to live out this congregations commitment to outreach as they offer another opportunity for generosity... this time for Interval House... on Saturday, May 15th from 10-noon, we will be collecting items to fill bags given to women and their children who are leaving Interval House to live on their own. For a list of items, please visit our website. New items are preferred but gently used items are also acceptable.

And you are, of course, invited to join us throughout the week for our various online groups and activities. Please visit our website or facebook page or look at the weekly email for more information about any of these.

That's it for announcements this morning.

Lets breathe deeply now of God's abundant love... as we prepare ourselves for this time of worship.

Call to Worship

Spring is the most amazing time. It's amazing because even though it happens every single year it still has the power to lift our spirits, plant joy in our hearts, and help us exhale.

I mean how amazing that the honking of geese can make us smile. How grand that the first Robin of the year brings a whoop of celebration. How wonderful that the song of frogs waking up from their winter slumber delights our souls.

It is no wonder of course that these things fill us with such happiness. We are, after all, Resurrection People. Our faith is built on a foundation of new life and new beginnings.

In the joy of the empty tomb we are called to embrace a new way of living. In this community of faith we are encouraged to ask questions that we might learn and grow in our understanding.

In this time of worship we are invited to hope and dream of what might be. This is the dance we are called to, this dance of new life. And nothing can keep us from it!

***Dare to dance with dreamers, sing their song,
Dare to dance their stories, sing out strong.
Dare to dance with freedom your whole life long,
Dare to dance again!***

This is the call!

Look to the skies be it rain or shine.

We look up and greet this day with hope.

Look around and see that you do not dance alone.

The Children of God are together in this moment and God is here with us.

Open yourselves to this time of prayer and give thanks

For we are Easter People!

Let us pray:

Holy One, Justice-Seeker, Lover of Creation –

Open us to learn new steps of faithfulness.

Give us courage and patience.

Come and dance with us, engage with us, as we seek you –

so that we can be risen with Christ and in Christ.

Be with us now, we pray. Amen.

Song: Lead Me, Lord offered by Sacred Sounds

Scripture *(read by Darlene Goodwillie)*

Acts 8:26-39 *(NRSV, adapted)*

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Sermon offered by Rev. Lindsay Mohn from Delisle Vanscoy United Church

Their encounter happened on the road. In no-man's land (or should we call it no-person's land?) – out in the wilderness, where no one was really in control and anything could happen. There were no borders, no boundaries and it was, well, a little wild. Philip was a bit surprised to find himself out there, to be honest... he had been guided by the Holy Spirit out of Jerusalem, where things had been getting more than a little dangerous, to the city of Samaria to share the good news about Jesus. That seemed to go well enough and he thought he might head to another city but now here he was out in the middle of nowhere with the only instructions directly from God: "get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

He wasn't sure who, or what he was looking for on this wilderness road... was he supposed to go all the way down to Gaza? Meet someone at an inn along the way? He had no idea. But Philip was obedient to the Spirit's call and so he got up and went.

As he was walking along the road, Philip suddenly felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit. He knew at once which traveler he should approach, and he took off running after a handsome looking chariot. He couldn't see who was inside but felt certain that they were the one he had been sent out here to meet. I love this image... of Philip the preacher and teacher being so moved by the spirit that he literally chases down a random chariot out in the wilderness to talk about Jesus and his love. He doesn't know who this person is or how they will receive him, but he knows in his bones that he's in the right place.

The book of Acts has some amazing characters in it, and Philip is about to meet one of my favourites – the Ethiopian Eunuch. We know a few things about this individual: he is an important person, a court official for the Queen of the Ethiopians. He is a very long way from home – at least 1000 miles. He was of a different race and culture from Philip, but they shared in common an interest in the prophet Isaiah. And we know that he was a eunuch – a non binary person, with a gender and sexual identity outside of the cultural norms of the time.

There's also a lot we don't know about our friend. We don't know what brought him to Jerusalem in the first place – was he a Jew who was on a very long pilgrimage to the Temple? Or had he been in

town on business for his queen and was drawn to learn more about the local faith? We also have questions about his status – he was likely a slave, but he was in charge of the Queen’s entire treasury so he likely had some power... was he also wealthy? Did he have the command of dozens or hundreds of other slaves?

Whatever the circumstances that brought the Ethiopian to be on the road at the same time as Philip, it is clear that their meeting was brought about by the Holy Spirit as Philip ran down the road after him. And for the Eunuch’s part, he seemed to take it in stride that a random preacher was chasing him down on foot – instead of saying “no thank you!” and driving faster (which to be honest is what most of us would do) he stopped the chariot and invited Philip in to sit with him and have a conversation about scripture and faith.

They talked about the passage that the Eunuch had been reading from Isaiah, and then Philip began to tell him about Jesus. There was a lot to tell – how his birth had been foretold, and his mother blessed, how he grew up in God’s favour and then set out to share the good news of the kingdom of God. I imagine Philip would have told some of his favourite stories about Jesus – maybe the healing miracles, or how he fed large crowds with limited resources, or how he ate with those considered outsiders. How his words and actions really inspired a lot of people to follow him, but drew out fear and anger from those in power. And then of course the ending that was really a beginning... that terrible day that Jesus was crucified, and the amazing accounts of his resurrection, the promise of new life for all.

And I wonder what it was in these stories about Jesus that caused the Eunuch to ask to be immediately baptized. Was it the healing and the feeding? Or was it the promise of God’s love for those that were considered outsiders that really struck a chord with him? After all he would have been an outsider on many levels, would have not been allowed into the temple in Jerusalem because of his status as a Eunuch. To hear that Jesus the Messiah not only accepted outsiders but embraced them, loved them and invited them into the kingdom likely resonated with him.

Whatever it was that touched his heart, when they passed some water the Eunuch ordered the chariot stopped. “Look! Here is some water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” he asks Philip.

Now this is a question that the church has gotten so wrong in so many ways over the centuries. “What is to prevent me from being a part of this church” actually has a lot of poor answers. We have excluded people both intentionally and unintentionally from being a part of the community, from participating in sacraments, from offering their gifts in leadership, for a long long list of reasons. For race. For class. For gender identity and sexual orientation. For economic status. For having beliefs that were too radical. For having beliefs that weren’t radical enough. For singing differently. For behaving in ways the church deems “immoral.” For wanting the sacraments to be celebrated differently. For not being able to climb up a bunch of stairs to the sanctuary. For speaking out against abuse and trauma within the church. We’ve gotten it wrong for centuries, and even though we are more aware now and are trying hard to be welcoming and inclusive, we still trip up.

But Philip, dear Philip, he gets it right. We don’t know what he said in that moment, but they pulled over and he immediately baptized his new friend. With no conditions. No barriers. No boundaries put around the faith or the baptism. Just the love of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and a bit of water on the side of the road.

It's in the wilderness, in the land without boundaries and rules where this amazing conversion happens. And it's the Eunuch – the individual who exists between boundaries and outside of norms – who the Holy Spirit chooses and chases down to be one of the earliest followers of Jesus.

This story about the Ethiopian Eunuch reminds us once again that God seeks out surprising individuals to help bring about the kingdom. For those of us who have ever felt a little odd, or a little different, or a little bit of an outsider, it is such a relief and a joy to hear that Jesus' earliest followers were a little bit like that too – that God not only accepted but actively sought out the outsiders to have important roles in spreading the good news. We don't know what happened next for the Ethiopian Eunuch – he went on his way rejoicing, but we're not sure where. What we DO know is that the Christian church in Ethiopia has a long and rich history – so maybe he went home and spread the word and started the church there!

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all of my days” Psalm 23 tells us, but another translation offers us this: “surely goodness and mercy will PERSUE me all of my days” – the assurance that we are all being chased by the Holy Spirit in some way. It sounds funny if you imagine, like I do, the Holy Spirit roller blading along after my car as I drive to the store... but what this phrase points us toward is an understanding that absolutely NOTHING is standing in the way between us and God's love. God's love is actively seeking us out, actively searching for a way into our hearts. We are all constantly being invited into the grand story of God's people, to participate in our own way in bringing about the kingdom of God. “What is to prevent us from being one of God's beloved children?” Friends the answer is absolutely nothing. So open your heart and embrace that invitation. Stop your chariot and pull over to the side of the road and splash around in the abundant love that you find there... and then go on your way, rejoicing. Amen.

Music: Wherever You May Go I Will Follow offered by Sacred Sounds

Prayers of the People (read by _____)

Adapted from prayers by Louise Mangan (Worship for All Seasons II, p.181) and Richard Rohr.

Loving God, you fill all things with a fullness and hope that we can never comprehend. Thank you for leading us into a time where more of reality is being unveiled for us all to see. We pray that you will take away our natural temptation for cynicism, denial, fear, and despair. Help us have the courage to awaken to greater truth, greater humility, and greater care for one another. May we place our hope in what matters and what lasts, trusting in your eternal presence and love.

Listen to our hearts' longings for the healing of our suffering world:

We pray for all people of faith and for those who persevere in your purposes, that all who love you may be united in your service...

We pray for people of every nation, that all may be guided and reconciled to one another in pursuit of your justice and peace...

God who birthed the Earth out of darkness and calls forth life from the depths of the land and seas, we pray that we may cherish all that has breath and may use creation's gifts reverently for the sake of the world you love....

Tender God, we pray for all who suffer from prejudice, poverty, hunger, and violence... may be comforted, honoured, and empowered... may your justice roll down like a mighty river bringing transformation, healing and hope.

We pray for the Indigenous peoples of this land. May new patterns of living together be life-giving and respectful.

We pray for refugees, for all who live without the security of a safe home, and for all who suffer oppression....

Compassionate God, we pray for people in the pain of sickness, loneliness, fear or loss, for those who need your persistent faithfulness and our persistent caring. We pray that all whom we name here now may receive strength and courage for new life....

(silence)

Into your hands, tender God, we commend all for whom we pray.

Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, as we say together the prayer that Jesus taught:

Lord's Prayer.....

Benediction

Poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen
penned these words that we can surely lift to God:

“Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove
Dance me to the end of love

Oh, let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone
Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon
Show me slowly what I only know the limits of
Dance me to the end of love.”

May we follow the lead of the Spirit
as we find expansive ways to dance the dance of love.

And may the Loving God,
Risen Christ,
and Dancing Spirit
fill you with all you need
for the days ahead.

Music: Dance with the Spirit