

Worship for January 30, 2022

Acknowledgment

Welcome and Announcements

Hello there friends. Welcome to worship with us today. As always we are so grateful you have chosen to join us.

This is the last Sunday you will be watching our pre-recorded worship services as, once again, we are switching it up a bit.

Remember the days when we just did the same thing Sunday after Sunday? Do you miss those days? Or maybe you're someone who loves change and you're just waiting with excitement for what the next big change will be?

Let me tell you about what's happening.

As you may know, a few months ago the church board passed a motion to become a Rural Connect hub. For those of you who don't know... or don't remember... Rural Connect is a program of The United Church of Canada that connects urban and rural congregations for weekly worship. This all happens with the use of satellite technology. So we have received a whole bunch of new equipment that we are figuring out. With the help of some wonderful volunteers, we have installed the equipment and are ready to test it out.

So, beginning next Sunday at 10am, we will be livestreaming our services with the new equipment. Unfortunately, given the high covid numbers, we aren't quite ready to return to in person worship so it will just be Debra, myself, a couple of musicians and the tech people here on Sunday morning but you will get to watch the service in real time. It will also be recorded and available to watch on YouTube and Facebook later in the day.

We will test out this part of the equipment throughout February and will then be in a good place to welcome our partner churches. The folks at Carlyle United Church are our first partner church and there is another congregation meeting tonight to make a decision about also becoming our partner. We are able to partner with 3 rural congregations... this means we have room for one more. So if you have rural connections... and know of a congregation that might benefit from a partnership with us, please let me know.

We are also still looking for some folks willing to help us out on Sunday mornings operating the equipment. I've said it before but I'll say it again... you can do it! You really don't need any technical skills and we will provide all the training you need. The other day I was speaking with another congregation in Ontario who is also a Rural Connect hub and was asking about their volunteers. I was told that the average age of that congregation is 88 years old and they have been managing the technology just fine. So...

Anyway, next Sunday you will receive the weekly email that will contain the links to watch our livestream on either YouTube or Facebook... you can choose whichever is easiest for you. You will use that link to watch live at 10am and you can use it as well to watch the recording later in the day. Those links will also be posted on our website and Facebook page for those of you who are not receiving the email.

A couple of other quick announcements...

Debra and I will be leading a Lenten Book study together beginning on Wednesday, March 9th. The book for this study is called Lesser Evils and is available both in paperback and digital formats. If you would like to order the hard copy, you need to let the office know NO LATER THAN February 9th. The cost is #15.95. You can order the digital copy at the United Church book store for \$7.95 and I have sent the link to that in the email and will also post it on the Facebook page for you. We don't know at this

point if that gathering will be online or in person... or a combination of the two... but we will let you know as soon as we have more information.

We are almost into February now and that means its time to plant a heart for refugees. Throughout the month of February, the Outreach Committee is inviting you to support refugees by making a donation and for every \$5 donated, a heart will be planted outside in the snow. You can stay tuned for more information about that.

And while we're planting hearts in the snow... how about building a snowperson too? United Churches across Canada are participating in a snow and ice art project. We are going to do our part in bringing joy and love to our neighbourhood by making a chain of snow people on the boulevard running along Taylor street. The hope is to make it look like they are all holding hands. So you are invited... on your own, with a friend or your family to come on by and make a snowperson anytime during the month of February. I'll also be arranging for a group build with the children and youth groups sometime in the near future. I'll also be taking photos along the way and sharing it to the public Facebook group dedicated to this project. People have already been busy creating some pretty amazing snow and ice art.

And that's it for me and announcements.
Let's turn our hearts and minds to worship.

Call to Worship

Last week we traveled to a wedding, a wedding in Cana and we were reminded of God's generosity. Today we will hear beautiful words of love, written by Paul and found in – 1 Corinthians - a passage of scripture often read at weddings.

What is love?

Love is patient and kind. It is not envious, or arrogant, or boastful or rude. It is not irritable or resentful; it rejoices in the truth.

What does it look like, feel like and how do we know we have found it?

Well it looks like happiness. It feels like warmth and you know it when you find it because it makes you feel free; it makes you more your true self. It builds you up and makes you strong. We know this because God is love, and Jesus Christ is God's love spoken to us, and the Spirit is God's love poured out on the world.

We light this Candle and remember we are loved with an enduring love, a love that will not let us go.

Gathering Song: Hope Shines as a Solitary Star sung by Kristie Elliott

Opening Prayer: (inspired by Nora Vedress, Calvary U.C., Prince Albert SK – gathering 2015-2016)

God we live in challenging times, it is good to know that your love is patient. When everywhere we turn, we hear hateful words, it is good to know your love is kind. When resentments build up, when our tempers run short, and we look at our neighbor with envy, it is good to know that your love, bears all things. When we feel worthless, useless, expendable - it is good to know that you believe in us and call us blessed. When the future looks bleak, and our doubts rage, it is good to know that your love is filled with hope for our lives, for our church, for the world, and for all that lives and breathes upon it. But most of all, when we feel we are at the end of our rope, facing a dead end, it is good to know that you are the God of new beginnings and second chances, and that your love has no limit, no boundaries, and most definitely, no end. For this we give thanks, for this we come to worship, for this we will live in love all the days of our lives. Amen

Hymn: Greatest of These sung by Sacred Sounds

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Reflection

The passage we just heard from Corinthians is likely one of the most well known passages. For sure I knew it long before I ever took an interest in learning about the Bible. I'd heard it at many weddings and I'd seen it on all kinds of wall hangings, coffee mugs and other such things sharing messages of love.

I hadn't really given it much thought though... just assumed it was telling us the qualities of real love... qualities I was pretty sure I'd never be able to live up to, I might add.

I mean really... is anyone ALWAYS patient... and kind... and not irritable or resentful?

Anyway... I was surprised when I really took a look at this passage and read it in the context of the rest of Corinthians... and realized that Paul's lofty love letter wasn't actually intended for starry-eyed lovers. He isn't writing it for people celebrating their relationship... wasn't offering advice on how to have a long and happy marriage.

Paul is writing this as a frustrated and bewildered spiritual leader.

He writing to a self-destructive church... directing them to get their act together before they destroy themselves and each other.

As well known Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber said, "this letter is a 'smack down'. They were bickering and dysfunctional and competitive. They were being petty and prideful and ridiculous. They didn't know who they were, and Paul was trying to remind them.... And he told them who they were by telling them about love. Not the romance of love. but of Love as origin. Love as source. Love as God and God as love. This love has nothing to do with feeling nice. It's actually not about feelings at all, its about truth. It's about the truth of who we are through the eyes of God who loves us fully."

If you read the first 12 chapters of Corinthians, you'll get a pretty clear picture of what Paul is responding to. The church has split into factions... people are pitting their religious leaders against each other, everyone has their eyes on power and prominence... each thinking they are more powerful – more prominent than the other. everyone is fighting... trying to bring everyone else down.

You could say the church in Corinth is a hot mess.

Just in case we... modern Christians... are tempted to poo poo the behaviour of the folks in Corinth, let's take a deeper look at Paul's "smackdown". It's not simply that love must outweigh the obvious

“bad” things in our lives. Things like greed, envy, lust, and hatred. Love must even outweigh the “good” things.

Paul writes that...

Spiritual gifts, — beautiful, life-giving, church-enhancing gifts given by God — are worthless in the absence of love.

Prophetic power — the ability to discern the Holy Spirit’s movements in the world and unveil the hidden truths of our time — is meaningless without love.

Knowledge — a deep and comprehensive understanding of all that we consider mysterious — is garbage when divorced from love.

Faith itself — is “nothing” without love.

Do we actually believe this?

Not just the theory of this... the practice of this?

Do we really value love more than we value being right?

Growing wise? Gaining power? Wealth?

Do we value love more than we value knowledge?

Feeling seen? Doing “good?”

In the context of the church, do we believe... and live... as though love is the most important thing we can do?

Before we just jump to yes... let’s remember that this letter about love says nothing about love as a feeling.

The love Paul describes is active... its dynamic...

Love isn’t an emotion...

its not something we wait around for... or we just happen to come across.

Its movement... its action

Love *acts* patiently and kindly.

Love acts against the impulses of envy, irritation, and arrogance.

Love yields, love rejoices, love refrains, love endures.

In other words, love doesn’t stand around waiting for a warm feeling to flow through us; love gets up and it gets moving.

□

So what does this kind of intentional and active love look like?

What does it look like for you?

What does it look like for this community of faith?

I’m not going to answer those questions... rather invite us all to reflect more deeply on them.

What does intentional and active look like for you?

Instead I want to talk a bit about how we get there... how do we love the way we are called to love? especially when we live in a time with so much fear... when everyone’s nerves seem to be a bit on edge... when we are more emotional? when we are more isolated... disconnected.

Paul spoke so passionately about love because he knew how important it was. Paul himself had encountered love in such a powerful way...

Remember the story of Paul... formerly known as Saul... a pharisee who ruthlessly persecuted Jesus’ followers... who sanctioned hatred, violence and murder...

until he had a shocking encounter with love on the road to Damascus... and everything changed.

Paul was struck blind by love... this was how he learned to see.

Love transformed him... and taught him how to love and be loved.

Paul is able to write about love with so much authority because he knew first hand what love could do. When he sees the hot mess that was the Corinthian church, he was able to remain hopeful because he knew what God's love could do.

God's love... incarnate in Christ... who appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus... on his way to persecute Christ's followers.

This is the love Paul is describing in his letter...

Christ is that love.

who bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

The love that never ends.

If this wasn't true, there'd be no hope...

no hope for the Corinthian church and no hope for us today.

Left to our own devices we can't be the love we need to be.

We can't stop wounding each other, distrusting each other, being suspicious or resentful or envious...

We can't stop trying to earn or buy love... we can't figure out how to separate ourselves from hurtful love (which really isn't love at all).

Our hope is the hope that Paul held on to... the hope that God will love us into loving. That God will be love... that God IS love... in us, around us, through us and for us.

Nadia Bolz Weber says, "This love is found in the gaze of God as God looks upon us naked and whole. Because this kind of love is characterized by the giver not the receiver. The truth of who you are is found in the eyes of God, not in the eyes of the world. When we know that we are loved by God in the fullness of God's knowledge of us we are free to live in this love. Free to transmit the love of Christ in a hurting world. Free to see ourselves and others as God see us. Not because we are good, but because we are loved."

If you are having a hard time seeing the truth of who you are... if you struggle with really understanding just how loveable and how loved you are...

I don't know what to say except... believe it.

And encourage you to do whatever you need to do to grasp that piece of truth...

and if you need some ideas, give me a call... I've struggled with this myself – I don't have the answers for you, but I do have my story and the story of countless others who have found their way into love.

You need to know how loved you are.

And the world needs you to know how loved you are –

because I think the best way for us to really engage with my earlier question of what intentional and active love looks like... is to see ourselves as actively loved.

You are loved.

Believe it. Feel it. Live it.

May it be so. Amen.

Hymn: Spirit Open My Heart sung by Elin Sletmoen

Prayers of the People

Love is hard God. Loving others is one thing but many of us have a hard time loving ourselves. We live with an unhelpful little voice in our head that tells us we are unworthy of love - that we are not good enough, attractive enough, smart enough - we're just are not enough. Quiet that voice God and whisper once again in our ears that we are your beloved. Help us to trust your love that will not let us go.

Love is hard God. Many of us live in an intimate relationship with a partner. We do our best to live a love that is not envious, or arrogant, or boastful, or rude. A love that is not irritable or resentful. A love that rejoices in the truth. Forgive us God when we get that wrong. We pray that truth and forgiveness might be the way we find our way back to one another. Keep our words tender toward one another. Help us have the wisdom to seek help in times of brokenness and to be mindful that no relationship exists in isolation. Help us to trust love that is patient.

Love is hard God. Many of us travel alone and sometimes the loneliness is painful, sometimes the road is filled with grief and loss. However we travel help us to trust that you walk along side. Help us to trust love that hopes all things.

Love is hard God. You've asked us to love our neighbors. Keep our hearts and hands open to those who struggle in poverty, those without safe shelter and those weighted down by addiction. Help us to trust love that is kind.

Love is hard God. The evening news tells of the brokenness of our world and all of creation. We pray this day particularly for the people of Ukraine who worry and wonder about the future at the hands of Russia. We pray also for the people of Syria and the famine that waits for them just around the corner. We pray for our own country and province as we struggle to keep people safe. Always we must not forget the need to continue the work of reconciliation. Help us to trust love that endures.

Love is hard God. But we know that with out love we are no more than a noise gong. Teach us your way of love, we pray as followers of love Incarnate Jesus the Christ - we pray as he taught us singing

Hymn: Go Make a Difference sung by Sacred Sounds

Benediction:

May you go from this time of worship knowing how loved you are.

May God's love wrap itself around you...

holding you tight,

moving you to share the love

with a world that really needs it.

Amen.

Sung Blessing: We are Marching sung by Sacred Sounds