

Worship with McClure United Church

May 24, 2020

Greeting & Announcements

Good morning friends. It is good to be able to greet you in this way and to share a worship experience with you. There are many limitations to worshipping on line, most notably, missing out on relationships and a sense of community. There is at least one benefit; however, you can worship on your schedule! Since these services are posted to McClure's website you can participate at any time. I hunch many still join us on Sunday mornings while others watch later in the day or even later in the week. Regardless, we're glad you can join us and look forward to when we can meet face to face.

Debra has been participating in a week of continuing education taking in the international Festival of Homiletics on line through out this past week. Laura and I along, with the Sacred Sounds, are hoping this morning's worship experience will touch your spirits.

Before we move into worship, I would like to share a few brief announcements:

- If you desire pastoral support or desire to speak to one of the staff for any reason we would be glad to connect with you. Please send us an email or leave a message on the phone in the church office.
- As Debra announced last week, some of the on line activities that Laura has been hosting are winding down as the warmer weather approaches. For an up-to-date listing of on-line events please check the McClure Website or the McClure Facebook page. Please note that the Friday morning coffee and chat continues at 10:00 am. each week.
- I am exploring the possibility of offering a Spiritual Conversations group during the month of June referencing Richard Rhor's book *The Universal Christ*. If you might be interested in joining this weekly one-hour conversation please send me an email or leave your name on the church phone. I will have further information available next week.
- Debra and Laura will be tossing the baton this week as Debra returns from study leave on Monday and Laura begins a week off that same day – hopefully both will feel some rest and renewal.
- Finally, a reminder that you will have received by mail the Community of Faith Profile for McClure United Church which is also posted on the website. It describes future changes to church staffing reducing the staff team to two full time ministry staff. The Board is considering this report at its upcoming meeting and is looking forward to hearing your ideas and responses. Please consider sending your insights to the Board. Once again emails can be sent to the church office and will be forwarded to the Board Chair.

Opening Prayer

Now let us take a moment to breathe deeply. I am lighting a candle praying that the light of Christ is finding ways to shine into your lives.

Just as the sun breaks over the eastern horizon changing the perspective of everything it touches, so dawn upon our darkness O God.

Touch the confusion and uncertainty that we have been feeling and reassure us that our lives are in your hands.

Dispel the darkness of self-concern, where we can hide from the needs of others: instead dazzle us with a vision of how we might share our lives so that both we, and our neighbour, are blessed.

Amazing Creator let the warm, bright rays of your love reach beneath the surface of our living and inspire us to cherish our lives, to care for others and to celebrate the wonder of your creation. This is our morning prayer. Amen.

Theme Conversation

This week's theme conversation was a taped Zoom call with the grade 2 children of McClure who all received their Bibles this week. We talked about the Bible and how it teaches us about God's love and presence in the world. We played a game of Bible trivia. The children who received a Bible this year are: Nixon Kosmenko, Olivia O'Neail, Idyn Loy, Helena Andre, Karissa Sherwood, Harrison Gervais and Josh Burlingette.

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Reflection

Ironically, all of my parent's siblings had only one child providing me with a net total of three first cousins. Of those three, one has died; one moved to BC and we fell out of contact; and one lives in Edmonton and we call each other on our birthdays. My extended family is unbelievably small. My cousin who died prematurely, birthed two boys – genealogists would call them my 'first cousins once removed.' A couple of decades ago the youngest boy moved to Saskatoon and we have become remarkably close. We often joke that we are each other's extended family. We have fun together and share some common interests despite an age difference of 14 years. We both pretend to golf, we enjoy a good game of table tennis (although I always lose), and we experiment with wine making.

There is one thing, however; that we do not share and that is the Christian faith. My vocation is an anomaly to him, as it has been to all of my extended family. One day we were bottling some red wine and he asked me if I would bother going to church if it wasn't my job. I responded that I would - that going to church is a positive discipline, like exercise or eating right, which helps me to keep my life in perspective. He goaded me a little by asking if I went to church so that I would be 'o.k.' for another week. I responded that I thought all of life was Holy, filled with a kind of awesome preciousness, and that church was one place where I could both experience and celebrate that Holiness.

Now it was my turn to be the inquisitor, so I asked him, "Do you believe in God?" Without hesitation he responded, "O yeah, I believe in something, in god I guess, I just don't see the point in going to church." At that moment the wine overflowed the carboy and we had to stop to mop up the floor.

I think St. Paul discovered my cousin's God. In this morning's passage Paul finds himself in the city of Athens, the heart of Greek culture and the intellectual centre of the Roman Empire. As we know from their mythology, the Greeks entertained the idea that there were many gods - Zeus, Thor, Aphrodite and so on. Although they possessed a proliferation of gods they also recognized that there may be gods which they hadn't named or even discovered. Paul came across just such a god in this morning's reading. Cast in gold and silver, a statue marked the place for worship, and the following inscription was written beneath the statue: "To an unknown god."

Perhaps this is the God which my cousin worships and if he does, he is not alone. Recent statistics reveal that 82% of the Canadian population agree with my cousin that God exists. I am not surprised. How can anyone deny that there is an awesome mystery to our existence? Who can find themselves on a country road late at night and look up into the night sky without wondering about the source of it all? Who can smell the earth or listen to wind in the trees and not wonder how this vast evolutionary cycle was set in motion? Who can listen to the sounds of music, examine shapes and colours, experience the imagination of the human mind and not wonder about the source of all creativeness? And finally, who can witness the gentle breath emanating from a sleeping child, or turn and walk away from the grave of a loved one, without concluding that life is Holy?

Writing in his book on meditation George Fowler suggests that meditation is not about bringing God into your life; it is about recognizing that your life is already being lived in God. We cannot escape the sense that life is Holy when we pause before a mountain scape, a prairie sunset, or a profound encounter with another human being.

In this morning's passage St. Paul applauds this religious intuition in the Greeks and suggests that he would like to introduce them to this unknown God. For Paul, the anonymity of God has been removed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul does not see the benefit of knowing God in vague generalities when, for him, God was made particular in the person of Jesus. Even Jesus himself declares that "God and I are one."

Hear again the statement of George Fowler: 'meditation is not about bringing God into your life; it is the recognition that you are already living in God.' As Christians we proclaim that Jesus knew that better than anyone else, that he was living in God, that he and God were one. As Christians we have given a name, a face, a life, to the unknown God.

Many of you will know that I have a great deal of respect for the pluralism of our world, so I am not suggesting that Jesus is the only name for the unknown God. There are other names: Creator, the Bab, Allah, Bhagavati and others – but, Jesus is the name for me, and perhaps, for you. Jesus does not allow us to relegate God to an indiscriminate feeling on a summer evening or to be content with a static shrine in a Greek city. If we say that Jesus loves God, lives God, is God - then God is about quiet moments in lonely places; God is about compassionate moments with a dying Lazarus; God is about caring moments near a wounded Samaritan; God is about courageous moments of breaking foolish traditions; God is about intimate moments with trusted friends; God is about acts of justice on behalf of the marginalized; God is about dying; and God is about hope beyond the power of death. If God is in Jesus, then God is known. If, as George Fowler suggests, we are living in God, then Jesus becomes a template for that living. We are called beyond the ambiguity of a vague spirituality.

I worry that those who drive up the statistics on God to 82%, are more than content to leave God as an unknown deity. Such a God requires nothing of them - moments neither of reflective prayer nor actions of care and compassion. I'm not suggesting that my cousin fails to show compassion to others or acts unjustly, but that without commitment to a spiritual path life can be random and care for others can be optional. For those who pursue the way of Jesus, or one of the other great spiritual paths, there is no choice. When we choose to follow Jesus we are called to live with compassion and justice all of the time. Of course we fail, which leads us to confession and to the intent to begin anew. There is a rhythm to the Christian life enacted every time we gather for worship. We praise God the source of life itself, we acknowledge our failures at living love and justice into the world, we hear the Good News that God loves us 'no matter what' and we commit ourselves anew to walking in the way of Jesus.

My life is no more valuable to God than that of my cousins. I am not necessarily more ethical or more compassionate, but I am more intentional about identifying a spiritual path and attempting to follow it. If nothing else, Covid-19 has shown that we can live quite well without endless consumption and even without endless activity. When we become quiet, we realize that life invites deeper engagement. Perhaps Covid has invited you into more intentional living. Perhaps you have rediscovered the benefit of prayer and reflection. Perhaps the way of Jesus is a path that is still relevant in the modern world and that walking this path will be bless both you and your neighbour. Our God is not 'unknown' – a transitory experience or a whim of fancy. When we encounter the Jesus story and live his way into the world God is embodied in us; and we each become shrines reminding one another how precious and holy life is. As you walk in the way of Jesus, may you be blessed and may you be a blessing. Amen.

Prayers

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

Opening ourselves to God's abundant love and grace – filling our hearts and holding our minds. We begin our prayers with prayers of gratitude...

for life, for love, for joy, for the many sweet blessings that fill our days.

We pray gratitude especially for your presence within and around us.

Especially in our more challenging times...

times of grief, of hurt, of anger, of frustration.

Thank you lifting us up... for holding us tight... for guiding us gently forward.

We turn our prayers to others now. We pray for all your people...

especially for those who are lonely, who are sad, who struggle with internal demons, those who feel caught in despair.

May they feel a crack of hope move through their hearts.

May they feel the whisper, the gentle touch of your love.

We offer all of these prayers to you, O God, knowing that you hear these prayers and all of the prayers held in our hearts. Thank you for hearing our call and for answering in love.

And now we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught...

Blessing

Go forth into this week knowing that the love of God can be found within and around.

May you be blessed, even as you are a blessing to others. Amen