

Worship with McClure United Church

September 6, 2020

Welcome

Good morning everyone and welcome to the worship of God with McClure United Church.

It is so good to be back with you this week. It was good to have some time away and it is good to be back.

I do wish that we were together this morning face-to-face but continue to be so grateful that technology allows us to connect here.

I understand there has been some amazing activity happening throughout August with the Being the Church program. You are all so amazing and your willingness to show up and be the church in this way is such a gift. So thank you.

WE are now looking at program possibilities for the fall and will be sharing information with you as it becomes available. I can tell that virtual programs for the children and youth will begin on September 20th. I am preparing Faith at Home kits for families and will be looking to deliver those in the next couple of weeks. Eden Polischuk has gratefully agreed to provide leadership for the children's program once again and we are very blessed by her leadership. We will be looking for ways to connect with families for whom online gatherings doesn't work so if you would like a visit or have ideas for how you might like to connect, please let me know.

And now as we prepare to enter into worship, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge that we are worshipping together here on Treaty 6 territory and homeland of the Metis People. As an affirming ministry of The United Church, we gratefully welcome all people... whatever your age, race, ability, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation... you are welcome among us. We value the gifts that all bring to this community.

Opening Prayer

Candle:

We light this candle knowing that Christ's love shines always, shines for those of us who are troubled,
who are anxious,
who are unsure,
welcoming us into the presence of our God who loves us into fullness.

Light Candle

Prayer: (inspired by Richard Bott, Gathering)

God, you meet us in so many places and in so many ways.
Whether or not we're ready to notice you, you come alongside us.
Even when we've done things that have caused harm
to your creation, to ourselves, to others, to you –
You do not turn away.
Thank you for all that you are in our lives.
Help us live our gratitude.
Amen.

Scripture: *Mark 4:35-41*

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Reflection

I have a story I'd like to share with you this morning....

Several years ago now, I spent two months of my sabbatical time in Nicaragua attempting to learn Spanish. I'd planned this experience for months and was so excited for the adventure. I'd made arrangements to stay with a family – none of whom spoke English – while I attended Spanish school. I remember arriving in my new home – with dirt floors, an outhouse, lizardy things crawling on the walls – surrounded by people I didn't know, couldn't understand, eating food I wasn't familiar with.

Everything felt so strange and uncertain and I could feel this low level anxiety bubbling away just under the surface. It didn't feel overwhelming and I had expected the experience to be unsettling – so I was learning to just take one day at a time, to be present to myself and to trust that everything would turn out ok – one way or another.

On my first day of class another student invited me to go hiking with her in the mountains the next day. Excited for the opportunity to make a new friend, I quickly said yes. Never having hiked a mountain, I had no idea what was in store for me. And I also had didn't realize that converse style sneakers with no support and even less grip were not the wisest footwear choice. So at the end of the day, I was exhausted, my feet were on fire and every muscle in my legs were pounding in protest.

One of my fears in Nicaragua was managing public transportation with my very limited Spanish. I did not relish the thought of ending up in the wrong place without any way of asking for help.

On this day I had to catch a bus from the mountain back to Esteli where I was living. It was a much longer ride than I anticipated and it was quite dark when I arrived at the bus station.

Now I had heard so many stories of bad things happening to tourists in various parts of Nicaragua and although I had been reassured that Esteli was a fairly safe place, those stories were playing through my mind as I stepped out of the bus station to catch a taxi home.

One of the very few things I knew how to say was my address.

My anxiety and fear were already threatening to bust through the surface into panic as I realized I had no idea where I was or how far I was from home. I have zero sense of direction and rely fully on my gps or friends to guide me to where I need to be.

I pushed the panic down and stepped out to wave a taxi. One taxi, two taxis, three taxis slowed down, looked me over... and drove by.

Finally a taxi slowed and stopped and I told the driver my address... and they didn't understand my terrible Spanish, so I said it again – and the driver just laughed, shook his head at me and drove away.

At this point full on panic overtook me... I remember standing on the sidewalk feeling completely terrified and powerless to do anything to make things better. I was certain I would never get out of this situation in one piece and all possible worse case scenarios were rapidly firing through my mind.

I have never been so terrified in my entire life. Until now. Along came Covid. This time, I am not afraid for my personal safety. I don't anticipate getting sick and, if I do, I hope that I am healthy enough to be able to get through it. What terrifies me is the uncertainty. This is not just the normal kind of uncertainty... uncertainty about a future we can never really predict... this is uncertainty of a future that we can't possibly even begin to see with any real clarity.

We are surrounded at this time with way more “what ifs” than I think anyone can be truly comfortable with. And the “what ifs” that we are facing now have a much higher impact than the normal “what ifs” that are just a part of living our lives... “what ifs” about our livelihoods, our relationships, our education, our hobbies and passions, our faith communities, our access to resources and, of course, our health.

Normally September is a time of great excitement and joy for me as I anticipate the beginning of a new church year – children, youth and cottage goers returning to church – programs starting up – the energy and life of church being renewed and recommitted.

This year as I begin my planning the excitement has been mostly replaced by apprehension and wondering. I don't know... are people tired of Zoom? Is it even safe to get together? What if we get together and people get sick? What will be like to get together with all of the necessary restrictions in place to keep everyone safe? How do I plan a meaningful and engaging program for children and youth? How am I supposed to know who is struggling and needs support when I feel so disconnected?

I've been doing this ministry thing for almost 25 years now and I had come to a place of relative comfort in my job. I felt prepared for almost anything... But not for this.

I, like so many others, feel like I'm learning to do my job from scratch and I have no idea how to do it effectively – I literally have felt like I'm flying by the seat of my pants and this is not my most comfortable way to operate. And its not just my ministry that feels strange and unfamiliar... its most every aspect of my life – parenting, shopping, maintaining relationships... I feel like I'm in a boat that is in danger of being capsized. The winds are blowing, the waves are pounding and it all feels so much bigger than my sailing abilities are prepared for.

Scary, isn't it? And I know I'm not alone on this boat – I know from conversation with friends, with family and with members of this congregation that fear and angst seem to be the most common response to questions about the future. But then... I look down and see there sleeping in the stern – our friend, Jesus and I remember this story of Jesus rebuking the wind and calling on peace – on stillness and I remember that I don't need to be a skilled sailor because I am not alone on the water.

When I close my eyes and imagine Jesus standing at the front of my boat, arms outstretched – voice strong and powerful, yet calm and reassuring – calling out the peace within the storm, I can feel a stirring of calm moving within me. The peace we desire is here – even within this pandemic storm.

Obviously, Jesus is not going to pop into the world, rebuke the pandemic and restore health and normalcy. But Jesus is with us... and the stories of Jesus – who lived in a time of great upheaval and uncertainty – do point us towards some very tangible truths that we can bring into our lives.

There is peace within the storm... we only need to calm the storm around us enough to catch a glimpse.

So when there is so much we don't know... and so much we can't do... what are the things we can hold on to that will help us find peace?

Standing on the street in Nicaragua, I couldn't suddenly speak fluent Spanish... I couldn't make a taxi stop for me... I couldn't call my host family to come and pick me up and I couldn't teleport back to the comfort and safety of my home and family in Saskatoon.

As much as I wanted any of these options, I couldn't make it happen. But – I could pause, even in the middle of great anxiety, to take a deep breath, look around me and take a step forward.

As I began to walk, I looked up and noticed a mountain to my left. I remembered that the mountain side of Esteli was behind my home so I was pretty sure if I turned left and walked straight up that I would be heading in the right direction. And that's what I did. I began to walk, singing quietly to myself any song I could think of that might bring me comfort.. "Jesus loves me" being a favourite. For quite some time I focused on breathing, singing and putting one sore foot in front of the other.

After some time, things started to look familiar and soon I realized I was walking past my school which was only another 15 minutes from home and I was now certain of the direction I needed to go.

I arrived home safely to a welcoming family, a hot meal and a bed that suddenly seemed like the most comfortable thing I'd ever laid on.

One step in front of the other, one more breathe, one more reminder that Jesus loves me and I made it.

Pulling ourselves out of the fear or anxiety or endless "what if" thinking is not an easy task – but if we want to live our lives with any sense of peace in these times, we have no choice. We need to find the little things we can do in order to not let all of the things we can't do overwhelm us.

I can't do my ministry perfectly and I will certainly make mistakes along the way. Focusing on all of the uncertainty completely disempowers me from any sort of functionality.

When I remember that my only job really is to be a loving presence... to share God's love and to hold the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection... when I remember the simplicity of what it is I'm called to do, I feel strengthened and hopeful and grateful for the peace within the storm.

So this is my living strategy for today – to be a loving presence – to hold up the hope that Jesus offers – and to be open to the movement of God's spirit as it reveals to us the next step, and the next step after that.

May we all seek... and find.. places of peace within the storm and when its too hard to find on our own, may we remember always that we are not in this boat alone.
Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of Grace, we give you thanks for your goodness, your blessings, and your patience with us. It is no secret that we often look for happiness and fulfillment in the wrong places, but we turn again to you, our God, in this time of prayer seeking your wisdom, guidance, and blessing. By your abundant grace - recreate us.

While we are aware of our own needs remind us that others in our church, our community, and our world are experiencing great struggles. And so we pray for those in need around us, asking for your blessing, and asking for your help as we seek to do our part to bring comfort, healing, and hope.

We pray for those who are sick, that all may have the medical assistance they need and the gift of healing in body, mind, and spirit.

We pray for those who are grieving, that all may experience the comforting peace of your presence and the assurance that they do not walk alone.

We pray for those who are hungry, homeless, or experiencing the stress and uncertainty of poverty. Give all, with more resources the confidence to share generously.

We pray for those who always find themselves in “last place”, for those at the end of the line, for those who are left out or forgotten. Let all know the joy of being first in your eyes and give us the courage to show them that honour when we find ourselves in places of privilege.

We pray for our covenant partners of Holy Spirit Catholic Parish. Bless them with wisdom as they live out their ministry in these challenging times.

We pray for our children and those who have care of them. For teachers and childcare workers, health care providers and councilors. For parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles and special friends of our children - we pray for strength and grace.

We open our hearts to you now, God, in a time of silent prayer....

We give you thanks that in the midst of our daily journey, to follow the way of Jesus, to love what is good and do what is right, you promise never to leave us or forsake us. Because you are our companion and guide, we will not be afraid. Thanks be to you, our loving and gracious God.

As followers of Jesus' Way we pray as he taught us:
Our Father...

Blessing

So I invite you this week to be intentionally about seeking places of peace and of stillness...

remembering always that we are surrounded
by the protective love of God,
by the strong guidance of Jesus Christ
and by the faithful wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

We are not alone... not now - not ever.

Thanks be to God.