

Opening Music: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus Instrumental*, Music: Joseph Medlicott Scriven, 1855, Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020.

Welcome

Peace be with you, during this rather unpeaceful time we are living through. I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my husband, Bruce Ley, we live and work in the township of Mulmur in Ontario and serve the Shelburne Primrose pastoral charge in the United church of Canada.

As you will know, throughout the world the numbers of infections from the pandemic climb, and the fractiousness and economic insecurity that dog the pandemic, continues. But in the midst of this disruption, are other disruptions, of a good nature, following as they do the inclusive ethics of our very own Jesus who welcomed everyone, without exception, without placing people in the tidy – but destructive – cubicles of categories.

As mostly young people take to the streets, demanding that we take seriously the care of the natural world and the care of one another, the spirit of Christ is alive and well under the grand cathedral of the sky. It has been let loose outside the tidy confines of church buildings, and this can only be a good thing for all those who cluster under the umbrella of a desire to ‘act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.’

The stumbling block here, might well be the word God. I would suggest that we crack that little three letter word open, seeing it only as a place marker a portal through which the entirety of time and space may travel, and all manner of possibilities are birthed. We are to walk humbly alongside all that is unknown to us, all that is a mystery, and that includes the natural world – which surely reflects for us the essence of divinity – and the wonder of each and every human.

I am not unaware of the rising tensions in our world at large, or the rising tensions in the political arena, or the rightful protesting for a more equitable world on the streets. I am not unaware of the tensions that may be rising in your own homes, within your families. I am not unaware of the uncertainty before us, or the uneasiness that is settling often into our hearts. I am not unaware of these things because they too are part of my life.

Which is why I am more and more grateful for the wisdom of a Sabbath practice, a day or time when we lay aside the harness of our lives that drives us to control and manipulate this world, to draw profit from it, to change it, to alter the course of time, to concern ourselves with its direction. We must be aware of what is going on in the world, certainly. But we must take a break from the relentless press of it as well. And that is Sabbath. And that is what Bruce and I wish to offer to you each week. A quiet time to reflect on the larger reality that sees love as the

founding and endless core of the universe, its healing balm, and its grounding principle – to be refreshed with, and reminded of, the compassion that ever flows towards us, if only we will let it wash over us, and make us whole.

Sabbath is an atmosphere of rest, peace between all things, and healing. May you enter it now.

Music: *Come and Find the Quiet Centre*, Music: Benjamin Franklin White, 1844, Lyrics: Shirley Erena Murray, 1989

Come and find the quiet center
 in the crowded life we lead,
 find the room for hope to enter,
 find the frame where we are freed:
 clear the chaos and the clutter,
 clear our eyes, that we can see
 all the things that really matter,
 be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a friend who claims us,
 cools the heat and slows the pace,
 God it is who speaks and names us,
 knows our being, touches base,
 making space within our thinking,
 lifting shades to show the sun,
 raising courage when we're shrinking,
 finding scope for faith begun.

In the Spirit let us travel,
 open to each other's pain,
 let our loves and fears unravel,
 celebrate the space we gain:
 there's a place for deepest dreaming,
 there's a time for heart to care,
 in the Spirit's lively scheming
 there is always room to spare!

Call to Worship

I have done several committals at the graveside this last couple of weeks. I always find the committals the most intimate, and difficult of the larger funeral service. In the chapel, there is music, and often personal reflections from others to consider. But at the graveside, there is only the very real presence of the one who has died. There is a finality to it, without the music or reflections as distractions. Words seem almost offensive in the midst of the sacred act of placing someone in the ground.

But here John Henry Newman, with his deep spirituality and sacred way with words, comes to my rescue. For he has written these most beautiful words as blessing and prayer in one and I turn to them often as I stand with others at a graveside. Newman writes:

May the Lord support us all the day long,
Till the shades lengthen and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over,
and our work is done.
Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging,
and holy rest, and peace at the last.

John Henry Newman is the resident theologian in our time together today. He was only last year canonized by the Catholic Church, recognized for the theologian and poet extraordinaire that he was. Newman began his calling as an English poet and an academic at Oxford University and then later, became an Anglican priest. He was part of the Oxford Movement in the mid 19th century, a group that felt that though much had been gained in the time of the reformation, much had also been lost. They suggested that the Anglican church might re introduce liturgical and devotional customs from our Catholic sibling. Newman eventually found this could not be imagined in the way he had hoped, and he, along with other Anglican priests in the 1840's left the reform tradition and were welcomed into the Catholic church. It is good to be reminded, that though the reformation took place some 500 years ago, there has always been movement back and forth between the sister elements of our faith.

Our call to worship this morning, is a reworking of Newman's prayer concerning the mission of his life, and, the mission of ours.

God has created us to do some definite service. God has committed some work to us which has not been committed to another. We have a mission. We may never know it in this life, but we shall be told it in the next. We are links in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. We were not created for naught.

We shall do good; We shall do God's work. We shall be angels of peace, preachers of truth in our own time and place, if we will but keep the commandments.

Therefore, we will trust God, wherever we are, we can never be thrown away. If we are in sickness, our sickness may serve God, in perplexity, our perplexity may serve God. If we are in sorrow, our sorrow may serve the larger purposes.

For the Divine spirit does nothing in vain. It knows what it is about. It may take away our friends. It may throw us among strangers. It may make us feel desolate, make our spirits sink, hide our future from us.

But, still, it knows what it is about.

Musical Interlude, Arranger/Artist: Bruce Ley

Opening Prayer (Mine)

Gracious One, Creator of this world and all that is in it,

Holder of all mysteries, weaver of worlds, light of light, and love of love,

How we stumble these days, even in our best efforts, we fail to open our hearts to the fullness that would embrace all you have to give us. We are small in our thinking, unsure in our generosity because we are unsure how to receive yours.

You give us too much. You offer us such endless mercy in response to our smallness of heart, we see your mercy as burden, and struggle to embrace it.

Help us with this smallness of mind and heart. Break us open and lay us bare before you that we may melt into you, and you into us, so that we are one.

And then, we can offer on your behalf the mercy and grace which the world waits to receive.

Amen.

Theological Teaching – The Reformation

In the reform tradition, of which the United Church of Canada is a part, the last Sunday in October is always set aside to remember the Reformation, which had its 500-year anniversary in 2017. The Reformation, in simplest terms, refers to the dividing of the original Christian faith into two sister elements. At the time, the religious upheaval was felt in every aspect of world politics and economics. It is thought by many, that we are currently undergoing a second reformation, a renewal of the core values of faith in the midst of world-wide distress and shifting worldview.

Rev. Trisha Elliott, a United church minister offered a series of blogs on the reformation two years ago, which I offer as links on our website. Here are four main things she feels the first reformation offered up, that we might consider again today.

God is bigger than we are.

At the time of the reformation, the powers in the church was held by the pope, the priests, the bishops, the ecclesia. What they said, was law. They wielded enormous power. They had their own army. And vast wealth. The reformers thought that perhaps the power should shift away from the hierarchical structure that controlled the church to God as the higher authority.

An informed faith is necessary.

500 years ago, there were no Bibles in the languages of ordinary people, the scriptures being in Latin, the language of the learned, the educated. The reformers thought the bible itself should be available to everyone. With the newly invented printing press, a flurry of interpreters set about the work of translation. They did not work from the Latin Bible or The Vulgate as it is known, but from the original languages in which the scriptures were written – Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. They created translations into the languages that people spoke. English, German, Spanish and so on. Today, the bible is available in its fullness in 700 languages, and at least some portions of the Bible have been translated into 3,386 languages.

We Stand on the shoulders of Others

Though we think of martin Luther as the initiator of the reformation, the reform movement had been in existence all along, with thinking theologians trying to draw the faith back to its core ethics and principles. No one person shifts history. We all work on our own, and yet with others, to shape and reshape our culture and our faith.

Change takes Courage.

It was not popular to criticize the church 500 years ago. Back then being burned at the stake was common occurrence. But if you love your faith, and love God, there is an impatience with anything that detracts from its wellness, and now, and then, there are changes to be made. We may not risk death by fire, but we risk nevertheless when we suggest change, and worse, initiate it.

Martin Luther, our poster boy for the reformation, risked his life for change, knew he stood on the shoulders of many others, demanded that people be informed about their faith, and lived in the largess of God's grace. Grace, he claimed, was essential to receive and offer.

In the late 1900's George Matheson penned these beautiful lyrics, that reminds us to hold our place close to the flame of love that is God, and in doing so, our reformation is within, and from there, flows the new reformation in the world.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee,

I give them back the life I ow,
That in thine ocean depts its flow may richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee,
My heart restores its borrow ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day may brighter fairer be.

O Joy that sleekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee,
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be.

***O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go, Instrumental, Music: Albert Lister Peace (1884),
Arranger/Artist: Bruce Ley***

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

Marion requested the reading of Psalm 23 this last week at Bob Webb's funeral service. It is a comforting reading, offering a well-loved pictorial image of the tender care of God.

Tradition has it that it was written by King David, who was a musician and lyricist well known in the court of Saul before he became king. It was said that with his singing and playing of the harp the young shepherd boy could sooth the spirit of the troubled leader. King Saul would eventually, in a fit of jealousy and rage, try to kill David, eventually taking his own life in battle, after much time spent in despair and anger, his bitter envy of David, twisting his once fine spirit until he was no longer fit to lead the Israeli armies.

But King David, wonderous musician though he was, was also a troubled person, gifted in many ways, but faulty in many ways as well. He played fast and loose with the commandments, showed himself to be prideful and grandiose, an inconsistent father, an unfaithful husband, a murderer. But still through all his long, adventurous, tumultuous life, he never forgot that God was in charge. And though he wandered from God, God never wandered from him, was always there to offer mercy and forgiveness, when David approached him with a humble heart.

This is Bruce's interpretation of Psalm 23. Bruce will tell you that he has often wandered from God, but, just as in the case of David, God has never wandered from him. And for this, the divine spirit is held in deepest affection, and known to be a comforter of the soul.

This is a very modern interpretation musically but note that the lyrics are from the Scottish Psalter of 1630, and the melody was composed in 1872. This psalm has travelled a long journey to be with us today, still offering comfort, still offering assurance of God's presence.

Psalm 23, The Lord's My Shepherd, Music: Jessie Seymour Irvine, Lyrics: Scottish Psalter, Arranger/Artist: Bruce Ley

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
e'en for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
yet will I fear no ill,
for thou art with me; and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me;
and in God's house forevermore
my dwelling place shall be.

Second Scripture Reading:

Our second scripture is from the lectionary this week, a scripture we have heard many times, because it is important. Here Jesus states clearly the core commandments of our faith. Jesus, remember was Jewish, and he knew all the many laws in the Hebrew text, as would have other Jewish men of his age. But when asked which one is the greatest, he narrows it down to two. And these two commandments, articulated by Jesus over 2000 years ago, are now, and still, the core tenets in our tradition, both Catholic and Protestant. And I would say, leaning as I do into

the new reformation, that they are tenets that can expand well past the Christian faith out into the world in general and guide us forward.

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Reflection

This scripture is the final one in a set of five confrontations following Jesus’ turning of the tables in the temple the week before his crucifixion. Mathew has laid out a series of vignettes wherein the religious and municipal leaders of his time attempt to catch Jesus up with questions designed to incriminate him. They questioned his source of authority, the place of Caesar in his economics, his knowledge of the Hebrew laws concerning marriage and resurrection. Always they were looking for a way to trip Jesus up. Because they were the ones who held the authority to proclaim one’s authenticity, and they alone. They did not want anyone interfering with their power.

In this text today, the authorities ask Jesus to take the 613 commandments laid down in the Hebrew law and reduce them to one single unifying statement. This was not an uncommon discussion among Hebrew men of learning. They were forever reading through and discussing the various commandments. If you are looking for something to read, you can plough through them yourself – law after law after law in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

The most popular choice in choosing one law was Deuteronomy 6: 5. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”. This is known as The Shema, Shema meaning Listen in Hebrew, for the verse before this is a command: Hear, O Israel, the lord is our God, the lord alone.”

Another popular choice was from Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Jesus scoops up these two choices, which he would have known, well, and combines them into one for his answer. He shifts the word might in the original to mind, however, offering up, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And note this turn of phrase, that upon the two commandments ‘hang’ all the laws and all the prophets. In the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish legal and exegetical teaching, it is said that the world itself hangs on the Torah – the Torah being the first five books of the Bible. But Jesus hangs the Torah, the teachers, the laws, the Mishna, the prophets, all of it, on the law of loving God and loving one another.

In the midst of the complications of everyday life, these days, it is good to have such clear, clear instruction on what is the core of all the instructions we are given.

As the reformation has taught us, and continues to teach us, our faith must be alive, informed, questioning, considered, reflected upon. This is true of all aspects of our lives, never more important than in the grounded principles that form the framework of our thinking.

Quiet yourself. Gather yourself. Know that the largess of God is beyond us, and yet the spark of divinity within us. Change takes courage. Courage is granted when it is requested. The new leader is not one, but many, not a singular person, but a group. Together we may imagine all manner of wonders. And if we are steady in our purpose and keep our eyes on God. We will be amazed.

Love God with all your mind and heart and soul. And love your neighbour as yourself.

Here I Am, Lord, Music/Lyrics: Dan Schutte, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist

I, the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save
I who made the stars of night
I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night
I will go, Lord
If You lead me
I will hold Your people in my heart
I, the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save
Finest bread I will provide

'Til their hearts be satisfied
 I will give my life to them
 Whom shall I send?
 Here I am, Lord
 Is it I, Lord?
 I have heard You calling in the night
 I will go, Lord
 If You lead me
 I will hold Your people in my heart
 I will hold Your people in my heart

Closing Remarks

There is a little fall newsletter available this week, both digitally and physically. It has messages from our clerks of session, at each church, both of whom are holding steady during these uncertain times with faith and goodness. The theme of the newsletter is inspired by our opening hymn – come and find the quiet centre – which both Ann and Gail suggest, in different ways, is what we are currently called to do.

It may not seem like anything important, to search for the quiet place within ourselves, to be calm in the midst of the storm, to practice the fine art of contemplation. But to empty ourselves of busyness and the swirl of emotions that often cloud our way, is to find ourselves connected with the divine spirit. And from here we draw our strength, and it is a far greater source of fortitude than we can conjure up on our own.

I remind you again, that all around you, in your home, in your memory, in your neighbourhood, there are those who would like to hear your voice, see your face if it is safe to do so, know your heart, and share their joy and their trouble. Gather strength from within. Reach out from there to comfort others.

We close with John Henry Newman's prayer to Jesus. And with our sweet neighbourhood friend Gary Heaslip's beautiful rendition of the beloved hymn, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. Gary recorded it some years back with Bruce on keyboards. It is still my favourite version. And we can fondly remember when we were able to gather in the Trinity sanctuary and Grace Tipling Hall and share music with one another. That day will come again.

Dear Jesus

*Help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.
 Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.
 Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly,
 that my life may only be a radiance of Yours.*

*Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in
contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus!
Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others; The light, O Jesus will be
all from You; none of it will be mine;
It will be you shining on others through me.*

**What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Music: Joseph Medlicott Scriven, 1855, Lyrics: Joseph
Scriven Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020, Artist: Gary Heaslip**

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
And what a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer

Oh, what peace we often forfeit
Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer

Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer