

BEACHBURG PASTORAL CHARGE

United Church of Canada

September 27th, 2020

Pentecost 17A - Creation Time 3

Lighting of the Christ Candle

The Christ candle is lit.

The Christ candle is lit, but what does it mean? Why are we here?

The Christ candle is lit, but does it touch our hearts?

(a moment of silence)

The Christ candle is lit, but does it change anything?

It's a light that flickers. It's small and seemingly insignificant.

It's made of ordinary material. It's rather unremarkable.

Yet, still, it speaks to us of Christ. Embracing those qualities, let us pray:

We come like flickering candles, Loving God.

We come feeling small and insignificant in the larger scheme of things. We come as ordinary folk seeking meaning in life.

Show us, risen Christ, as we pay attention, as we give reverence to you, that in our "normal" lives, you give us abundance—

just as you gave abundantly of your very self for a broken world.

We come to embrace that abundance into our growing wholeness. Amen.

Introit – Holy, Holy, Holy (please no singing but please feel free to stand if you desire)

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty!

Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;

Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,

God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship

On this first Sunday of Fall, it's once again time to resume worship. Some of us had a summer of recreation or re-creation, while others may have been at loose ends, feeling lost, anxious, or disconnected, and some may have been working hard to make ends meet. The biblical story is not about perfect people; instead, it is the story of people like us who lose their way, who stumble, and who are unsure of what a deep relationship with God really feels like. Know this for certain: God knows all about our fears and anxiety, our complaints, our running away, our doubts, and our sense of alienation. God is always searching for us even as we are searching for God. Come, let us rejoice together, the lost, the seekers, all of us beloved of God.

Hymn: "This Is God's Wondrous World"

- 1 This is God's wondrous world, and to my listening ears
 all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
 This is God's wondrous world; I rest me in the thought
 of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, God's hand the wonders
wrought.
- 2 This is God's wondrous world: the birds their carols raise;
 the morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.
 This is God's wondrous world: God shines in all that's fair;
 in the rustling grass or mountain pass, God's voice speaks
everywhere.
- 3 This is God's wondrous world: O let me ne'er forget
 that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
 This is God's wondrous world: why should my heart be sad?
 Let voices sing, let the heavens ring: God reigns, let earth be glad!

Opening Prayer

Let us rest into silence in this place of worship as we let go of all concerns and cares during this moment of stillness and peace. The Spirit of Life reveals itself to us in the soft darkness of our closed eyes and gentle breaths. Let us feel the complete love of our Creator God in the quiet sanctuary of our hearts. Let us breathe deeply of Christ's holy presence in this place. (*pause*) Let us worship God in this holy place.

Minute For Mission – Jean

Ministry of Music – Jim Labow, Barry Stephen, Heather Campbell

Prayer of Confession and Words of Assurance

O Gracious God, you are the reason we are here. You have given us, on this earth, everything we need to survive and live. You provide what will fill our bellies, minds, and souls. Please show us the way so all who inhabit the earth can live in harmony with each other sharing what you provide. May we not waste what you have given us. Forgive us and challenge us to a new way when we do. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Words of Assurance

God's promise is that God is with us, through our journey of life and beyond.

We are never alone.

We are enveloped in the presence and the mercy of God, through one another and in the Spirit. Even when we feel abandoned and forsaken, God is with us. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Alleluia, amen!

Hymn: "Teach Me, God, to Wonder"

1 Teach me, God, to wonder, teach me, God, to see;
let your world of beauty capture me.

Refrain

Praise to you be given, love for you be lived,
life be celebrated, joy you give.

2 Let me, God, be open, let me loving be;
let your world of people speak to me. Refrain

3 Let me, God, be ready, let me be awake,
in your world of loving my place take. Refrain

4 Teach me, God, to know you, hear you when you speak,
see you in my neighbour when we meet. Refrain

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Acts 15:12-19

The Jerusalem Council

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon Peter has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,

even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’—

¹⁸ things known from long ago.”^[a]

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Meditation – “Rolling Out The Red Carpet”

When I was taking aviation technology in college one of the first things we learned about in aerodynamics was something called “drag” Or what we would call friction.

Engineers over the years have worked on designing features that produce less friction like laminar flow wings or by counter sinking the rivets that allowed for an undisturbed airflow over aircraft. United Airlines says its tests have shown that just washing the engines and aircraft help it save about three million gallons of fuel annually by reducing friction.

But friction doesn’t just happen between materials, it can also happen between people.

So, this morning we have heard the story of a defining moment in the early church. The incident is known as the Jerusalem Council, which took place about twenty years after Jesus' resurrection. And at its heart, the issue was friction.

At this gathering, the early church found itself wrestling with questions of participation and salvation. Specifically, the question being debated was what is actually required to become a full-fledged follower of Jesus?

According to Luke the author of the book of Acts, the church was off to a good start. On opening day, thousands of Jews embraced Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. But before long, the message of Jesus started to overflow into non-Jewish regions. Gentiles heard and believed. And once they believed they wanted to belong.

But this presented a problem. The Jewish Christians weren't quite ready for that. After all, Jesus was their Messiah. And they had been waiting a long time for him. They'd paid their dues – they had kept the old story alive, even during the 400 years of Divine silence that preceded Jesus' arrival. And now, their story had been fulfilled – and they weren't quite ready to share. And so, the leaders of the early church gathered in Jerusalem to figure out what to do about these “Johnnie-come -lately's” (these Gentiles).

The Chairman called the meeting to order. The question on the table this morning, "What exactly are these new converts converting to?"

Because, in the minds of the Gentiles, they were leaving their pagan beliefs to become "followers of Jesus." Full stop. But in the minds of the Jewish Christians, they had some really important traditions that they wanted preserved. It was all well and good that they had found Jesus – but what about the rest of it? After all, this is the way things had always been. Their traditional practices, were, well, tradition!

And besides, these newcomers did some strange things that were downright offensive to traditional Jews. Their eating habits, for example. Gentiles ate anything you put in front of them! The way they dressed was down right "loosy goosy!" They didn't keep Sabbath, they didn't have any ceremonial cleansing rituals, or any of the other traditions that made a good Jew a good Jew!

So, they concluded there was only one logical solution. The Gentile Christians should first become Jewish. Just give 'em a list. They can come back when they've got it worked out. And, we'll welcome them then.

Now, if becoming a convert to Judaism was as simple as being schooled in the Jewish scriptures and Hebrew traditions, it probably wouldn't have been such a big deal. But unfortunately,

for the guys, it meant more than that. Because, becoming Jewish required surgery!

Bottom line? The “Church new members classes” were full of women and children – while the husbands waited in the car! And yet, the good news of Jesus Christ was irresistible. The converts just kept coming. Something had to be done!

And so, the early church did what churches always do. They called a meeting. Someone made a motion. “I move that the Gentile Christians become proper Jews before they become Jesus followers.” “Do I have a seconder?” And then came the discussion...

Almost everyone in the room agreed. It was time for these new converts to learn some manners. “We don’t mind that they want to come to our church,” but they better start acting a little more like us,” someone says. Murmurs of agreement could be heard around the room.

Finally, the apostle Peter steps up to the microphone. A hush falls over the crowd. When Peter speaks, people listen. “I’d like to remind you of my own experience with Gentiles and the gospel,” he says. “God made it abundantly clear to me that salvation was to be offered to everyone on the same terms: faith in Christ alone.”

Peter reasons, "He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. My Jewish friends, who are we kidding? We don't even keep the law of Moses all that well. Why burden the Gentiles with it?" That was a pretty compelling argument!

Now it was James' turn to say a few words. James came to faith in Jesus rather late in the game, but then who can blame him? Who of you would be quick to proclaim your own brother to be your "personal Lord and Saviour?" After quoting a little scripture he delivers a line that I think should be a whole lot more familiar to the modern church than it is!

James says, "It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." And then he drops the mic and walks away. The meeting is all but over.

That's quite a statement. "...We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." Those words would change the whole trajectory of the Christian church forever...and yet, chances are, you've never paid them much attention.

The Christian church would fulfill God's promise to Abraham – to be a blessing to all people – probably only because of James' words that Spirit-filled day in Jerusalem. The Christian church would spread to the ends of the earth because of this decision.

I think James' statement should be an addendum to our Pastoral Charge mission statement. I think that one sentence should be the benchmark by which all decisions are made in the church.

In other words, churches should bend over backwards to help outsiders become insiders. Churches, after all, are in the conversion business – we are all about helping people to turn their lives in God's direction. And according to Luke's account, removing unnecessary friction from the process was a major determinate in the church's ultimate success.

But I wonder, what does that look like today? Today, the issue probably isn't whether church visitors should obey the 613 commands of the Law of Moses. But maybe, today we have a different kind of friction. Maybe the friction today is a way of being church that doesn't meet the needs of the current or next generation.

Now I have not strayed far from the traditional ways of doing church when it comes to our worship service. But the last 6 months has challenged my assumption that things need to remain the same.

But now that we are back in church I wonder how engaging would our way of being church be to someone who stepped into our little bubble this morning

I'm sure they were appropriately welcomed, handed a bulletin and currently would probably be asked a number of health questions. They would make their way to a socially distanced seat and wait awkwardly for the service to start. They would then experience a pretty traditional worship experience.

A choir anthem, a bunch of long scripture readings, a sermon that hopefully is not too Boring or Dry, Irrelevant or Unengaging . Usual stuff! And since "You only get one chance to make a first impression."

I often wonder if they would leave and never return. Would the the friction they encountered – for whatever reason – prevent them from coming again. The Bible says, "All of heaven rejoices when a person comes to God." I wonder how heaven would respond on that day?

I agree with Howard Hendricks, a Professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, when he said, "It is a sin to bore a person with the Word of God." I'd say, "It's a sin to make church boring in general." It's a sin to present God and His story (the greatest story ever told) in an unengaging manner.

Because when we offer up an unimaginative version of church, we're actually communicating something about God. We have an incarnational faith – it's not just up in our heads, but we

experience God in the flesh. And when we fail to engage mind, body and soul in worship, we are teaching people something about God.

Lesson #1 – Church is boring. Lesson #2 – Faith is boring. Lesson #3 – God is irrelevant. And sadly, these are three lessons already well learned by our culture. They're pretty sure they know exactly what church is all about, and they're not interested.

Now, here's the thing. As we slowly emerge from this pandemic we have the chance for the Spirit of God to take us in some amazing new directions. But we must be intentional about creating environments that are welcoming and engaging. And, that at times may mean messing with our well-ordered church. But in light of our Bible story this morning, maybe it needs to be done.

Maybe, what it means to be faithful community is to be a group of people called together for the purpose of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in order to do that effectively, we need to be a community of people who are always saying, "What friction exists for people who might join us, and how can we neutralize it?"

I want to be part of a church that intentionally decides, like First Jerusalem Church that, "We should not make it difficult for the

Gentiles who are turning to God.” And then, to make it our unwavering mission to roll out the red carpet and serve somebody.

Here’s a question that I think gets at the crux of the matter. “What is the faith of the next generation worth?” What is the faith of our kids, grandkids and great-grandkids worth? What is the faith of the family down the road, who think they might come to church some time in the future when this whole pandemic thing runs its course, but aren’t really sure it will be for them? For me, the answer is “Everything.”

Everything else we do here hinges on our ability to pass on a living and vibrant faith to others. Otherwise, it is all for not. What is the faith of the next generation worth? Everything.

What it means to be faithful community in the 21st century. And my bottom-line today is simply this: A church that lives out the ministry of Jesus Christ is a church that actively rolls out the red carpet for somebody outside the church. When the church is at its best, it is saying “Who can we serve, who can we reach and who can we bless in the name of Jesus?”

The answer to that question will take a thousand different forms, and a thousand different combinations.

It will take a whole church culture, totally committed to capturing Jesus' vision for His church.

And then rolling out the red carpet, because it's what the church, when it was at its best, has always done. It's our "tradition!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Dedication of the Offering

Glorious Companion God, we seek to walk gently on your good earth. We are committed to living with respect in creation. Help us be good stewards of earth, water, and sky. We offer ourselves and our resources so that your ministry is life-giving. May these offerings become hope for creation and possibilities for your church. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Creator of all that is good, your entire earth swells with your glory. You fill your whole world with life; you fill us with new life and we now pray for all those in need of your abundant life today.

For this holy gathering in times of great uncertainty, and for all the people of God in every place.

For peace, and justice among all people in this time of great unrest in our us versus them culture.

For students, teachers, and parents as our children and grandchildren continue their studies in whatever form that takes.

For workers whose work is uncertain, or non-existent or stressful and for those who employ and manage them during this truly uncertain time.

For farmers as they now harvest the abundant fruits of the earth,

For those who contend with the forces of nature from wildfires to hurricanes that must now rebuild their lives.

For this special part of the world that we call home and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love. We now pray for those that are sick, suffering in mind or spirit, or whatever distress or special concern we may have this day, we now silently name them before you, loving God. Whatever their need or personal crisis that has become too heavy to bear, we ask you to guide, guard, nurture and sustain them.

Creator God as you fill us with new life we thank you for your assurance that If we keep your commands, our lives will be full until the end of time. Abba, you know us better than we know ourselves and you love us despite our weaknesses. Shine your brilliant light into our shadowed corners; we long to live as one with you and bring you glory and honour. May we, the congregation of this community of faith bless others daily in new ways. Show us those new ways, O God. Let others notice you through our words and actions. Let us learn and know what you want us to do here in your world as your earthly vessels. We pray all of this is the words of Jesus who taught us to pray saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen

Commissioning and Benediction

As you leave this morning, I invite you to notice! Notice the sky that brightens, the earth that supports; the air that invigorates, the flowers that praise; the smiles that warm, the people who love. Notice the trees, that exhibit, the rhythm of the seasons. Take in the beauty of creation with every breath. Notice, and discover in the noticing, our call to care for God's gift of creation.