

Prelude: “Jesus, priceless treasure” [HWB #595] [Annie Schulz]

Gathering Thoughts: Doug Schulz

Welcome to this the first “Live” worship service at Grace Mennonite Church since the middle of March. It is good to be ‘back home’ together. But, of course, we are together “apart”, keeping appropriately distanced as per the protocols expected of people who show care and kindness to each other at a time of global pandemic. This of course means that we need to be masked, which will hide our sunny smiles, but cannot stop the warmth in our hearts from reaching out to one another as we continue our worship following our summer “horizons of hope” theme.

So, today’s service will be much like times before in terms of outline of the worship service, but there will be differences. Since we cannot touch, we will wave during the Passing of the Peace. I’ll give clear directions when the time comes. No offering will be collected in offering plates, but you’ll see the offering box set out on a table in the back of the sanctuary. As for singing, you are invited to hum or whisper along as Annie and the singers lead us.

Our speaker today is our new Associate Pastor, Beth Woelk, who will explore the idea that the kingdom of God emerges in surprising, potent ways from unlikely and hidden places, and we can be transformed as we discover and claim what God is doing often in the ordinary aspects of our lives. Thanks to Beth for being willing to preach in her very first Sunday with us in ministry at Grace!

Thanks also to Ted Kopp who is our sound technician and who will look to recording this service so it is available to you or those who could not attend today on CD or as a download from website or from our weekly News memo which will be emailed right after the service today.

Call to Worship & Prayer: Doug Schulz

Our call to worship and opening prayer today is from the Vanderbilt worship resource material: “Through dreams and visions, O God, you broaden the horizon and hope of your people, that they may discover the meaning of your covenant, even in the midst of trial and exile. Increase the number of those who believe in your word so that all people may joyfully respond to your call and share in your promises. In Jesus’ name we pray, AMEN.”

Scripture: Psalm 145:1-11 [Read by Doug Schulz]

- 1 I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

- 4 One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
- 5 On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- 6 The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
- 7 They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

- 8 The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

- 10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
- 11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power.

**Hymn: "Sing praise to God who reigns" [HWB #59]
[Congregation standing]**

*Sing praise to God who reigns above, the God of all creation,
the God of pow'r, the God of love, the God of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul is filled, and ev'ry faithless murmur stilled.
To God all praise and glory!*

*What in almighty pow'r was made, God's gracious mercy keepeth.
By morning glow or evening shade, God's watchful eye ne'er sleepeth.
Within the shelter of God's might, lo! all is just, and all is right.
To God all praise and glory!*

*Our God is never far away, throughout all grief distressing,
an ever-present help and stay, our peace, and joy, and blessing.
As with a mother's tender hand, God gently leads the chosen band.
To God all praise and glory!*

*Then all my gladsome way along, I sing aloud thy praises,
that all may hear the grateful song my voice unwearied raises:
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart! Both soul and body, bear your part!
To God all praise and glory!*

Passing of the Peace & Prayers of the People: [Doug Schulz] [Vanderbilt worship resources]

I invite you to remain rooted where you are, but to turn toward one another and offer a symbol of God's peace – perhaps a little bow of the head, or a wave of the hand, or hands clasped together in a prayer symbol, or one hand over your heart and the other reached out toward another person.

Now, let us join our hearts in this prayer that will end with us saying “The Lord's Prayer”. Please say, “Hear our deepest prayers, O God” when I say “We join our voices and our hearts”.

O God, you invite us to hold the needs of our brothers and sisters as dear to us as our own needs. So, loving our neighbours as ourselves, we offer thanksgiving and petition on behalf of the church and the world.

We consider those of our church who are suffering with illness or undergoing treatments or working with the sadness and pain of grief in their lives. We think of those for whom this pandemic situation has created panic or pain, hardship or heartache. For them, we join our voices and our hearts. ***Hear our deepest prayers, O God.***

We remember people in our community and our country and around the world who are on the front lines of health-care and community service, whose lives are all the more intensified these days of the ongoing COVID pandemic threat, and we ask, Lord God, that they would find strength and courage for their work, and that their work would be effective in caring for patients. For those who are researching cures, may they find wisdom and insight to discover the scientific success that will bring healing and protection around the world. For these workers, we join our voices and our hearts. ***Hear our deepest prayers, O God.***

We give you thanks, Lord, for providing resources to us, even as we acknowledge the donations and offerings that have continued at our church in spite of the great changes over the past four months. We pray for people in our community or elsewhere who have lost part or all of their income or livelihood at this time, that they would find resources of support and employment. We pray for a careful but sure recovery of the economy as things move forward with opening of businesses. And we pray for the politicians and leaders that guide us all forward in these matters. For them, we join our voices and our hearts. **Hear our deepest prayers, O God.**

And now, for all these things and many more, we acknowledge that we want to be loyal to your calling to us to be faithful citizens in your Kingdom, O Lord. So we join now to say the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, saying: "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be 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, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. AMEN

Hymn: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise" [HWB #70]

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might,
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all, life thou givest, to both great and small.
In all life thou livest, the true Life of all.
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.*

*Great God of all glory, great God of all light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.*

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 [Read by Beth Woelk]

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[a] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Reflection: "The Hope of Hidden Wholeness" [Beth Woelk]

I discovered a fun fact this week! Did you know that Canada is the largest producer of the mustard seed? In 2019 we produced over 134,000 metric tonnes of mustard seeds. And the city Hamilton is the largest miller of dry mustard in the world. Hamilton hosts a mustard festival each year celebrating the history of the mustard seed and it's culinary and medicinal uses. In my research this week I learned that the mustard seed is of course a spice but it's oil can also be used in fabrics and fuels. Incidentally, national mustard day is this coming Saturday August 1st. In the Christian faith the mustard seed has become a symbol of faith and charity, in Buddhism a symbol of humility, and in many mystical traditions a symbol of

the surprising potency and interconnectedness of life. For centuries, this ordinary seed has been a symbol of the sacred.

Sometimes it's difficult to explain or speak about sacred things, to find words to articulate our experiences of God or to express the mysteries of our faith. We try, we use linguistic tools like similes and metaphors, rhetoric and allegory. We tend to talk about holy things indirectly by talking about ordinary things and trusting one another to make the connections.

Sometimes someone shares a comparison that catches us by surprise and makes us think. How are these two things alike? How deep does this connection go? When an image catches us by surprise and our everyday understanding of things is broken open, we are invited to get curious, to use our imaginations, and to search these new understandings for what is old and what is new.

Jesus did this all the time, he was always making comparisons. If anyone was qualified to speak directly about God, surely it would have been Jesus, and yet he too speaks indirectly using surprising comparisons. Throughout the gospels we see him teach this way, people are compared to sheep, the word of God is like a seed sown in different kinds of soil, and God is like the owner of a vineyard. In the Matthew passage we have just heard, Jesus offers 5 snapshots of the Kingdom of Heaven. At our house we like to refer to the kingdom of heaven as the "Kin-dom", in order to help us better understand and embody Jesus' revolutionary vision of a community of equals serving one another and joining together with the Divine activity that is always breaking into our reality; empowering us with healing and hope, freedom and mercy. So that is what I mean when I speak of the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, it's like yeast, like a buried treasure, like a fine pearl, and like a net cast into the sea. Once again Jesus uses the ordinary to explain the extraordinary. He breaks open our everyday understanding of things and invites us to consider them anew. He provides abiding images that invite us to enter in and explore, to look beyond our assumptions, and to see in a new way.

As I sat with each of these 5 comparisons and again turned to theologian Barbara Brown Taylor's book *The Seeds of Heaven*, I loved the images and invitations that emerged. The first two comparisons, a mustard seed and a handful of yeast...small, unimposing, not much to look at, at least not at first. But give either one something to work on - hide the seed in

some soil or the yeast in some dough - and the results can be astounding. A tree big enough for birds to nest in, bread enough to feed a family for a month. If the kingdom of heaven is like this, then it is surprising, potent and more than meets the eye.

The next pair of comparisons paint first a picture of a man who finds buried treasure in a field, covers it back up and sells all that he owns to buy the field. Second, we see a merchant who searches for a pearl of great price, finds it, and sells all that he has to make it his own. Each man finds something of great value that makes everything else he owns trivial in comparison and so he does not think twice about trading it all in. If the kingdom of heaven is like this, then it is rare, but attainable for those who are willing and eager to pay the price.

The final comparison - of the kingdom of heaven and a fishing net - tackles things differently. Thrown into the sea, the net gathers fish of every kind, good and bad, which are sorted out once the net is full. If the kingdom of heaven is like this then perhaps it is not something that we find, but something that finds us and hauls us into the light.

What is striking about all 5 comparisons, is their hidden nature - the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast hidden in the dough, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl hidden among all other pearls, the net hidden in the depths of the sea. If the kingdom is like these then it is not something readily apparent to the eye, but something that must be searched for, something just below the surface of things waiting to be discovered and claimed.

There is a piece of a poem by one of my favorite writers, Trappist monk and theologian, mystic and activist, Thomas Merton that captures this well. "There is in all things...a hidden wholeness. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a foundation of action and joy. It rises up in gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created."

So why the hiddenness? Perhaps the kingdom is hidden because the quest or the journey you have to take in order to find it is precisely what will transform you into the kind of person who can see it in the first place and then participate in it. There is something reciprocal that happens when we search for and find our treasure in the living and active Presence of the Divine. We too are found and our brokenness and hidden wholeness revealed. It is in our searching, longing, tending, and joyful devotion that we

are transformed and given the wisdom and imagination to see the tree within the seed; to notice what is hidden in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives.

Perhaps the Kin-dom of God is hidden in our conversations, food and friendships; in the books we read and the music we enjoy; in films and artwork, gardens and forests; in the faces of our kids; in the joys of life and in the sorrow, the healing and the brokenness, in the normal everyday work, rest and play that fill our daily lives. I find this tremendously hopeful. Perhaps that's why Jesus told stories of ordinary things: farmers and fields, women and bread, merchants buying and selling, and why he used words like fish, net, sea, pearl and joy. The kingdom is like these ordinary things; the kingdom is found in these ordinary things. May we search and find this hidden wholeness beneath the surface of our everyday lives. May we have eyes to see and hearts that are transformed. Amen.

Hymn of Response: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” [HWB #324]

*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things shall be added unto you. Allelu, alleluia!*

*Ask, and it shall be given unto you. Seek, and ye shall find.
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you. Allelu, alleluia!*

Benediction: Doug Schulz

Go in peace to follow Jesus, who taught us to remember and proclaim that there is a kingdom of God that is full of power and glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Sending Hymn: “You are salt for the earth” [HWB #226]

*You are salt for the earth, O people, salt for the kingdom of God!
Share the flavor of life, O people: life in the kingdom of God!*

*Refrain: Bring forth the kingdom of mercy, bring forth the kingdom of peace.
Bring forth the kingdom of justice, bring forth the city of God!*

*We are a bless'd and a pilgrim people, bound for the kingdom of God!
Love our journey and love our homeland: love is the kingdom of God!
[Refrain]*