

Prelude:**“Great is the Lord”****[Annie Schulz]****Call to Worship & Prayer:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to worship at Grace Mennonite Church. We seek today, as always, to consider what it means to find our hope at all times in Jesus, and to let God’s Spirit make us feel at home in our lives of worship and of service in the world.

As June continues to unfold, we may well be thinking of the fact that Canada Day is not far away. But many Canadians are feeling terribly sorrowful these days as we have heard of the horrendous hate-crime committed last Sunday against Muslim neighbours in London, Ontario. And our sadness grows too in our deepening awareness of the history of abusive, identity-destructive, and even murderous treatment of Indigenous people, particularly children, in our nation.

How do we worship, how do we pray, in times like these? Some people might say, “Why bother? God seems not to be paying attention.” Others would argue: “God is listening to our prayers, but God’s way of answering them is always through our changes in attitudes and actions toward peace, justice, and love of neighbours, strangers, and even enemies, in Jesus’ name.” Let’s pray for that now.

O God, we call out to you in humility,
confessing our deep need at all times
for the blessing of true spiritual awareness.

May we feel assured in our faith that you are present with us,
and within us, as you are within all the peoples of the world.
May we be empowered by your love, as revealed in Jesus,
who treated all people with compassion, calling everyone alike
to surrender the self-absorption that creates enemies of others,
sometimes that creates disgust or hatred toward our own selves.

Help us to listen today to the promise
of transformation of ourselves and the world
that is provided when we trust your grace and follow your ways
with holy desire to love our neighbours as ourselves.

O God, we center now inside your presence
and we commit to hear your voice, and take your hand
as we live with gratitude toward peace and justice in our land.
In Jesus’ name. Amen

Hymn: "God of the Bible"

[Voices Together #420]

*God of the Bible, God in the Gospel,
hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come,
You are our center, daylight or darkness,
freedom or prison, you are our home.*

*God in our struggles, God in our hunger,
suffering with us, taking our part,
still you empow'r us, mothering Spirit,
feeding, sustaining, from your own heart.*

*Those without status, those who are nothing,
you have made royal, gifted with rights,
chosen as partners, midwives of justice,
birthing new systems, lighting new lights.*

*Not by your finger, not by your anger
will our world order change in a day,
but by your people, fearless and faithful,
small paper lanterns, lighting the way.*

*Hope we must carry, shining and certain
through all our turmoil, terror and loss,
bonding us gladly one to the other,
till our world changes facing the cross.*

Refrain: *Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise,
God always faithful, you do not change.*

Scripture: Psalm 92:1-4,12-15

[DS]

- 1 It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
 - 2 to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
 - 3 to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
 - 4 For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.
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- 12 The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
 - 13 They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

14 In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
15 showing that the Lord is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Prayers of the People

[DS]

Today's "prayers of the people" are focused on a call out to God to help us see ourselves as people of the world who focus on becoming friends of humanity, friends with everyone and anyone, respecting and transcending differences in order to realize the reality of one human family belonging to the holy, compassionate One we may refer to as our "Heavenly Father", who invites us to live with wholeness day by day, to live lives of wide-reaching grace.

This prayer is adapted from a Church of Scotland prayer written by Rev. Andrea Price. In the silent spaces between sections of the prayer, think of those close to you, or far away, and remember in particular the Indigenous community, our Muslim Canadian neighbours, and all persons in many lands still affected by the global pandemic awaiting vaccines and medical care. Shall we pray.

Heavenly Father, you call us to be your friends and to make friends of others – more even, to recognize in them our brothers and sisters, your family in Christ. So we pray for ourselves and for the world and its people...

We pray for all areas in the world where deep divisions run between ethnic groups because of race, religion or past history...

We pray for our communities where different traditions shape different outlooks on things. Lord, help your people to listen well to each other that we may learn to live together knowing that though different we are your family...

We pray for our own families. We acknowledge that family life can be difficult, and sometimes harsh words and hurtful or thoughtless actions have affected relationships. Lord, empower us at all ages and stages of life as your children to be patient, slow to anger, wise, and forgiving...

And now, as we acknowledge that it is hard to know how to pray sometimes when we see harsh things in our world, or are aware of the hardness too often in our own hearts, and when we don't know quite how to respond, we thank you for teaching us to pray with committed faith, as Jesus did when he said:

"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: **“Come and Find the Quiet Centre”** **[Voices United #374]**

*Come and find the quiet centre 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, face to face,
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!*

Reflection: **“The Mystery of the Seed”** **[Beth Woelk]**

This week I was remembering a common school project that many of us would have experienced as kids, planting a bean seed in black soil within a paper cup and waiting for it to grow. I remember brimming with hope as I brought my seed home and placed that cup of dirt upon a sunny windowsill. I remember watering it each day and wondering what was happening beneath the surface. And I recall that one evening my curiosity and impatience got the best of me and I began fingering around in the soil to find and draw the seed to the surface in order to check if anything was happening. My Dad, who caught me in the act, cautioned me not to do this. He encouraged me to let it be, to trust the mystery of the seed. “Go to bed”, he said “and one of these mornings you’ll wake up and there will be a surprise waiting for you.”

In our gospel lection this morning Jesus tells two parables that center around seeds. These stories are windows into what the realm of God is like and how it emerges as well as what role we play in that unfolding. Let’s read these parables together:

Scripture: **Mark 4:26-34**

26 He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes

in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” 30 He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” 33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

We know that telling parables was one of Jesus’ favourite ways of teaching. And scholars of the historical Jesus, suggest that the Kingdom of God was Jesus’ central teaching theme. He came to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom is both a present and coming reality and that our God is not remote and removed in some distant sphere, but in our midst, in our daily lives, in our inner beings, actively offering us gifts of growth and abundance. This kind of kin-dom is an alternative way of being and living, that makes us beloved children of God and family with all people and creatures. It proclaims that kinship is our true reality, not alienation.

The literal translation of parable from the Greek - parabola - is “*thrown alongside*”. Parables are stories that are thrown alongside our lives for us to abide with. Jesus used them to illustrate these more abstract ideas about kin-dom by using familiar imagery to describe that which is beyond words, allowing listeners to see something about God and Life that they might not otherwise see. As he shared these stories they fell like seeds into the open hearts of the listeners, thrown into the soil of their beings, disturbing, encouraging, bringing invitation and hope. And they have the power to do the same for us today - over and over again.

As I sat with these seed parables this time, I was most struck by the first story and the image of the sower. In the first story, the gardener simply scatters the seed on the ground, the seed sprouts and grows and she has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without her help: first a stem of grass, then the bud and then the ripened grain. She simply sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises, and time passes within the rhythm of ordinary days. The key to the kin-dom’s emergence is clearly not human effort or human understanding. In the parable, the gardener does not worry about the growth of the seed and does not have any illusion that she is in control of this process. Theologian Wendy Farley writes “*trust so deep that we can sleep without anxiety is much more useful to us than fussing over a little seed.*” She continues: “*Jesus is calling us to a very different way of being with ourselves, with one another, and with the divine, by asking us to recognize that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arises as naturally as seeds growing.*”

But there are lots of times when it doesn’t feel natural aren’t there? When we can’t see evidence or at least not the signs we expect that the kin-dom is emerging in

ourselves and in our world. And like I did as a child, we are tempted to dig up the soil of our lives looking for results. We often want to control things and so we come up with quick fixes, neat answers and theological certainties. Perhaps you find yourself in a space of waiting and not knowing, a liminal time when life as you once knew it no longer exists and yet a new reality hasn't yet emerged. Illness, loss, job uncertainty, marital separation and other major life changes can plunge us into dark times that break us open, strip away our illusions of security and leave us feeling vulnerable. As the gardener in the parable, we are invited to rest and to trust the mystery of the seed. Our ultimate call is to abide in the One who gives life to us and to the world in every moment. We are asked to pay attention to what emerges even in the midst of the sharp-edged realities of life and to trust that spiritual growth and intimacy with God arise in our everyday reality and throughout the passage of time.

As a pastor and spiritual director I am interested in spiritual growth and intimacy with God. And as I've crossed over into the second half of life, I have become increasingly interested in what spiritual writers call "second half spirituality". This is thought of as a stage of spiritual growth and development we enter when we shift our focus away from the sense of identity, importance and security that we established in the first half of life through productivity and accumulation. Now in the second half we find our identity in a much deeper place and a sense of true self and real purpose in our inherent and inner relationship with the Divine. This shift often comes through failure, significant loss, and life just turning out so differently than we planned that we let go and surrender to a deeper understanding of ourselves and a more intimate dependency on God. This journey can involve intense grief, wrestling and struggle. It also yields moments of the deepest joy, freedom and purpose we will ever know.

While the "second half" holds many invitations to grow in God and find deep meaning in life, it can be tempting to try to force growth and meaning, to make sense of the ways that life has surprised and even sometimes blindsided us. We may find ourselves tilling the soil of our life over and over looking for answers. It is natural to wonder if the seeds we've planted in our lifetime have germinated, grown and produced fruit. To ask "Have I...am I making a difference in my family...in the world?"

With these questions in mind, let us turn to Psalm 92 read earlier for us by Doug. Here we see the image of one who rests and abides in God, declaring God's steadfast love in the morning and God's faithfulness by night. The psalmist sings of those who dwell with God day by day, those who are planted in God's soil, flourishing like palms and tall cedars. In their old age they still produce fruit: they are always green and full of sap. If there is one thing that you take from my reflection today, I hope it is this. You are still sappy. What if we saw our aging as growth in God, not as decline or diminishment as we usually think about it in the Western

world but as a time for bearing and harvesting fruit. In the second half of life...in our 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's we are still full of sap: creativity, imagination, freedom, courage, hope and lots and lots of love. We are invited to continue to plant seeds of kindness, compassion and love and to trust that they are part of the ever-emerging kin-dom of God.

We also live in a time when it may be tempting to question where the evidence of God's kin-dom is emerging in our collective reality, in our larger world. Many churches are declining and social and racial injustice, climate change and pandemic realities all leave us wondering. At times it appears as if nothing is changing.

Many of us have been reeling over the news of the bodies of 215 indigenous children found buried at the former residential school in Kamloops B.C. I once again found myself acknowledging my part as a settler/colonial Christian with privilege, acknowledging the ways that the consequent horrors of our history and residential schools continue to play out across our country this very day, and praying that something much more than only "deep sadness" would arise in our hearts and in our Nation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was an honest invitation to a difficult and painful process of healing and the TRC's calls to action remain largely unanswered. I walked as part of a Pilgrimage for Indigenous Rights in the Spring of 2017 organized by Mennonite Church Canada and Christian Peacemaker Teams whose hope was to embody a tangible response to the TRC's Calls to Action, specifically Call #48 which summons all churches to learn about the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, facilitate public dialogue around it, and embrace its minimum standards. Part of this journey was to walk in support of Bill C-262 - an act to ensure that the laws of Canada are in harmony with the United Nations Declaration - put forth as a private members bill by at the time NDP MP Romeo Saganash. When the bill was adopted by the House of Commons but then stalled and eventually died in Senate review it felt like a huge step backwards for reconciliation. This and so many other realities could easily cause the indigenous community and those committed to reconciliation to despair over the lack of evidence that change will ever happen, that seeds planted will ever grow. However, I am ever inspired by the courage and hope that I see in indigenous friends and in organizations who continue to persistently plant small seeds day by day even though immediate results aren't evident. The kin-dom of God is like that.

And the kin-dom of God is like a woman who years ago had a vision for a women's drop in centre and the work of Westview Centre4Women continues to grow and expand today. The kin-dom of God is like the literal seeds and harvest of MCC Grow Hope. The kin-dom of God is like a 90 year old who has kind words for their neighbour every day. The kin-dom of God is like a bunch of Mennonites, Muslims, Quakers and United Church folks working together to sponsor refugees from South Sudan. The kin-dom of God is like the leadership development of men and women

at Meserete Kristos Seminary and the largest growing Mennonite church in Ethiopia. The kin-dom of God is like prayers of a 70-year-old doing the inner healing work of trusting how loved and held they are by God. And you could come up with your own lists. The kin-dom of God is like...

Jesus' second parable about the mustard seed - that crazy, invasive weed that grows out of control - emphasizes the fact that the kin-dom of Love will grow into a reality that is beyond our capacity to imagine. The kin-dom will not be what we expect or even what we want; in fact, it will probably stir up resistance in us. It's counterintuitive and countercultural to place trust in an invasive kin-dom that grows in ways we do not fully understand or control. But that's the invitation Jesus offers. So what would it be like for us to do that? What personal and collective rhythms of prayer, meditation, exercise, art, play or study might help us trust in the mystery of the seed and keep on planting? I'm grateful to be part of a church community and leadership team who are full of sap, who are planting seeds, and who are finding ways to recognize, welcome and participate in the growth of the new kinship that is possible and is emerging within and around us as we abide in Christ and Christ in us.

Hymn of Response: "Abide in Me, Lord Jesus Christ" [by John Ogasapian]

*Abide in me, Lord Jesus Christ, come into my heart this day;
For thy Word, O Jesus Christ, is a lamp to guide my way.*

*O stay by me, Lord Jesus Christ, all thro' the coming days and years.
Be thou my friend, Lord Jesus Christ, take away all my doubts and fears.*

*Be born in me, Lord Jesus Christ, so may I be born in thee;
born to new life, Lord Jesus Christ, my life a symbol for all to see.*

Benediction: [BW]

May the God of Surprises delight you, inviting you to accept gifts not yet imagined. May the God of Transformation call you, opening you to continual renewal. May the God of Justice challenge you, daring you to plant seeds in trust. May the God of Abundance affirm you, nudging you towards deeper faith. May the God of Embrace hold you, encircling you in the hearth of God's home. May the God of Hopefulness bless you, encouraging you with the fruit of the Spirit. May the God of Welcoming invite you, drawing you nearer to the fullness of God's expression in you. May the God Who is Present through the way and words of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, fill you so that God's healing and hope may flow through you to the world.

Sending Hymn: "God Calls Us" [VT #394]

*God calls us to be followers of Christ,
and by the pow'r of the Spirit,
to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace,
so God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.*