

Prelude:**[Annie Schulz]****Gathering Thoughts, Call to Worship & Prayer:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to this time of worship in the middle of May! I wish I could say that the COVID-19 pandemic is about to go away and things will be back to normal soon. We keep hoping and praying that the restrictions on gatherings and the availability of vaccinations will help us all turn the corner toward better times, all right. But we must live on bravely in light of the current reality.

So we are grateful that we can still share worship experiences here at Grace this way. Thanks again to our music people and technicians, and to our team of writers and speakers. Today's reflection will be given by Laur Steven, who will be exploring the way Christians of various traditions try to understand the will of God, especially in trying times like this.

Now, this week holds for Christians the biblical story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. In fact, Thursday – the day we are recording this service – is Ascension Day. Our Call to Worship and Opening Prayer are taken from resources on this theme found in the wonderful website developed by Christine Longhurst of Winnipeg, a professor of music and worship at Canadian Mennonite University. I will actually offer the prayer first – a prayer of confession by Malcolm Macdougall of the Church of Scotland – and then will follow with the call to worship by a Rev. Mindi.

Too often, Lord God, we are hesitant in our proclamation;
seeking safe and suitable opportunities to speak of our faith.

Too often, Lord God, we are half-hearted in our service;
reluctant to stand out from the crowd or to attract criticism.

Too often, Lord God,
we live as if dependent wholly on our own resources;
relying on our perceived skills and modest insights.

Too often, Lord God,
we look to the clouds for our inspiration,
in the vain hope of finding you there.

Forgive the poverty of our efforts and the frailty of our faith
and open wide our hearts and minds to the immanent presence
of our Risen, Living and Ascended Lord Jesus Christ . AMEN

Prayers of the People:

[Beth Woelk]

As many of you know, our family has been journeying closely with our dearest friends as they offer tender and attentive palliative care to their youngest 17-year-old son whose grandparents are in our congregation and who we hold with love and prayer in our hearts.

Most of the time I have no words. No words to say, no words to pray. Often all I can do is whisper their names. Mostly, I turn to silence trusting the Spirit to intercede with groaning too deep for words.

Sometimes I simply pray the refrain:

God have mercy

Christ have mercy

Spirit have mercy

For our Prayers of the People this morning, I invite you to join me in this refrain in the quiet of your heart or aloud into the space where you sit listening or reading. Let us lift up our joys and sorrows, requests and gratitude, awe and wonder.

Christ who became human and experienced the joys and sorrows of life; thank you that you are able to sympathize and rejoice with us. Because you arose and ascended and sit at the right hand of God, a new world has broken into ours, a new community of justice, freedom, healing and love is being birthed.

We praise you for the many joys of life; the joy just to be alive on a fresh new morning, the beauty of springtime, blossoms and birds, and the gift of community and relationships with loved ones. Help us to share the abundance in our lives and to work for the growth of your Kin-dom of Love.

God have mercy

Christ have mercy

Spirit have mercy

(silence)

As our mediator you advocate on our behalf and so we boldly lift to you our prayers for; creation and it's care, for those who live in or are fleeing from harm and injustice, for our world as we continue to live with a global pandemic, for India and other places across the globe without enough vaccines or medical support, for those struggling with aging, illness or broken relationships, and for those who are journeying through profound loss.

God have mercy
Christ have mercy
Spirit have mercy

(silence)

We pray that we might have eyes to see and ears to hear, and that we might be your hands and feet in our relationships, in our communities, in our world.

Give us wisdom, discernment and unity in your church as we seek to embody your love and become bread for a hungry world.

God have mercy
Christ have mercy
Spirit have mercy

Hymn: “The Church of Christ, in Every Age” [VT #395]

*The church of Christ, in ev’ry age
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage,
and keep on rising from the dead.*

*Then let the servant church arise,
a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ’s sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ’s humanity.*

*We have no mission but to serve
in full obedience to our Lord,
to care for all, without reserve,
and spread his liberating word.*

Scripture: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 [Laur Steven]

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers[a] (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the

place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Reflection: “What Would Jesus Do During COVID?” [Laur Steven]

Next week is Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the early church receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the great commission beginning in earnest. After Easter, but before Pentecost, the Jesus-followers were in effect in lockdown, hiding from the authorities as they waited in the upper room for the gift of the Spirit. And yet, even at this early point, as we heard in our reading from Acts, the group was already organizing itself as the church, the body of Christ. And this is a task that we Jesus-followers still have, 2000 years later. And how we organize ourselves is crucial to what kind of witness we present to the world. What I’d like to do today—while we are still in Eastertide, but before Pentecost, and still in a form of lockdown—is reflect upon two things: the questionable relationship of some churches to the authorities during our Covid-19 pandemic, and the faithful and promising relationship of other churches, our own included, to the government restrictions. Along the way I’ll give a bit of context by briefly outlining the differing ways in which church traditions have discerned the will of God.

As of this week, “Alberta now leads Canada and U.S. in per capita COVID-19 cases” as a CTV News headline puts it. Premier Kenny has been hesitant until recently to impose the rigorous constraints recommended by the health care system, quite probably because the province—including some of its churches—has been most vocal in opposition to government restrictions. The recent spike in cases, and rise in ICU admissions as well, appears to have changed Kenny’s position, and might begin to moderate the stance of civil disobedience taken by, for example, GraceLife Church of Spruce Grove, and its pastor James Coates. Coates was charged in February with breaking Covid restrictions on church gatherings, and then jailed for 35 days because he refused to agree to his terms of bail that he would abide by the rules. At the end of March he finally pleaded guilty to disobeying the restriction and was fined \$1500. and released. He stresses that he was fined and jailed **not** because he disobeyed the government, but because he followed Jesus Christ. In early April the RCMP closed the still non-compliant church, and fenced it off. A statement on his church’s website, dated mid February, says that

We are gravely concerned that COVID-19 is being used to fundamentally alter society and strip us all of our civil liberties. By the time the so-called “pandemic” is over, if it is ever permitted to be over, Albertans will be utterly reliant on government, instead of free, prosperous, and independent. As such, we believe love for our neighbor demands that we exercise our civil liberties.

As the Covid case numbers rise to unprecedented levels in the province, perhaps Pastor Coates will come to see that love for his neighbour just might involve his church supporting a government concerned for the “sanctity of human life” in Premier Kenny’s words. Kenny appealed to GraceLife Church to “reflect on the life ethic that is shared by every major faith community.”

[<https://edmonton.citynews.ca/video/2021/04/07/why-did-it-take-several-months-for-gracelife-church-to-be-closed-down/>]

I want to step back a bit now to survey briefly the ways a selection of church traditions have discerned the will of God. Some such context may help us understand how or why there can be such big rifts between professing Christians.

The Roman Catholic church believes that God’s will is discerned through a combination of scripture and the tradition of apostolic succession. The apostle Peter was ordained by Jesus to establish the church, and therefore the succession of bishops following him have the authority of God in interpreting scripture and decision-making, with the Pope having the final say.

The Reformation, led initially by Martin Luther, wanted no “priestly authority” so abandoned apostolic succession in favour of *sola scriptura* [scripture alone]. But who then resolves disputes in interpretation? Theologians, using primarily their erudition and reason, are called upon for advice. “The 298 individual congregations, who make up LCC[Lutheran Church Canada], have the right of self-government with LCC serving as an advisory body.” [LCC website]

In the Methodist Church we find what is called John Wesley’s quadrilateral of four elements in discerning God’s will: scripture, experience, tradition, and reason. While scripture is primary, experience is next in importance. As Wesley said, “What the scriptures promise, I enjoy.” The church also expects a “Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world, and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships.” [Council of Bishops—umc.or—Retrieved February 3, 2008] So there is still a strong central ecclesial structure.

Anabaptists distrusted the reliance on church tradition and apostolic succession, and desired to return to the values and beliefs and practices of the early church as revealed in scripture. They also distrusted reason as a human and fallible faculty. They initially relied on scripture plus Holy Spirit. But what are the dangers here? Perhaps a leader, despite being full of zeal, is led astray and becomes a false prophet. So, Anabaptists added community discernment. According to C. A. Snyder the “gathered congregation of believers” discerns both letter and spirit, and “the one to whom God has given understanding shall explain it” (p. 13, *From Anabaptist Seed*). This is still not free from abuse, as the charismatic leaders of the terrifying Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster demonstrated. Menno

Simons added another check on spiritual claims, one which defines Anabaptist Mennonites still: these claims must be measured by the life and words of Jesus. So, Anabaptists determine God's will through scripture, Spirit, gathered community, and the example of Jesus Christ.

Now, what about GraceLife Church, Alberta? According to their website, "The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently applies the literal grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit." What this means is that the scriptures are the literal, inerrant, Spirit-filled revelation of God. Well, ideally, perhaps. But how does this church guard against misinterpretations, or even of false prophets in its midst? And here's the rub. The website says they choose their elders and deacons according to New Testament procedures: "We teach that these leaders [elders and deacons] lead or rule as servants of Christ (1 Timothy 5:17-22) and have His authority in directing the church. The congregation is to submit to their leadership (Hebrews 13:7, 17)." The leaders discern; the flock submits and follows. If you disagree, you are subject to disciplining by the same leadership group. One could argue that they have reinstated their own version of ecclesial leadership, one which gives divine authority to a small group of men.

When the RCMP closed GraceLife church and erected a fence around it, there was a large protest by largely non-church members who saw the closing as a flashpoint. The *Edmonton Journal* posted a story on its website about the closing and protest. Included was a photo of two counter-protesters standing across the street holding placards. One read "WWJD? Hang Out with a Cohort of 12"; the other read "Jesus would say, Spread Kindness Not Covid."

What would Jesus do?... Asking that question requires that we look at what Jesus did and said. And when we do we find, as Pilate did, that in the words of Norman A. Olson, "this Jesus was a Man of peace, a Man of total submission to governmental authority." [garbc.org] He paid his temple taxes; he told his questioners to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's; and he told all of us to go the extra mile. What I hadn't known until doing this preparation was that "Under the Roman Impressment Law, a Roman soldier passing by a Jew could order him to carry his pack for one mile. Jesus asked his followers to go two miles instead of one." [Source: theidioms.com] Significantly, Jesus did not resist his arrest, and stopped his disciples from doing so.

Jesus both **was**, and **told us** he was the good shepherd who protected us and died for us, and rose for us, and remains with us as the Pentecostal Spirit of mission who, as Doug spoke to on April 25th, "shepherds us always forward toward 'the city of God' where there will be healing and peace for all the peoples of Earth." And Jesus both **was**, and **told us** he was the true vine, and as we the branches

abide in him, so he as the vine abides in us. In this mutual abiding, we are pruned for fuller life. As Beth spoke to on May 2nd, “when we abide in God as God abides in us, our will and desires ... are energized to love beyond our own ideals and to sprout acts of compassion for all creatures.”

I want to close today by looking at our assigned lectionary passages. In our reading today from Acts we find Peter and 120 others waiting for the coming of the Spirit, but nevertheless practicing being the new church by ensuring that the witness and testimony to Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension was complete by adding Matthias to the apostles’ number to ensure 12. They are in the process of becoming shepherds to a vastly larger flock. They are building a sheepfold. How do they do this? **Why** do they do this? How do they discern that doing this is the will of God?

First, they rely on Spirit-inspired Hebrew scripture foretelling Judas’s betrayal and death. Second, they rely on their own experience of and testimony to Jesus’s life: from his baptism until his ascension. Third, they rely on their tradition, in which the casting of lots was a way to ensure the Spirit is directing a present decision. Fourth, they also may have relied on a version of community discernment in that the men nominated to replace Judas had to be disciples who had followed Jesus from his baptism to his ascension, so perhaps the entire group of 120 was involved in putting them forward. Likely, though, it was only the 11 apostles who cast the lots for the replacement 12th. And it’s clear only men were given this opportunity. Does this mean we are bound to this process? I don’t think so. In her commentary on this passage Jerusha Matsen Neal says “To follow the example of the early church is not to commit to a rigid practice of decision making or a particular structure. It is to recognize our own need to lean on divine guidance, to trust God’s ability to speak, and to faithfully act in response.” [workingpreacher.org]

Psalms 1 is the introduction to the Psalms and seems to be a straightforward separation of the good and the evil, with the righteous following the law of God, and the wicked scoffing at it. But it has two images at its heart which suggest a different nuance. We have the memorable image of the righteous being like “trees planted by streams of water”, followed by the equally compelling image of the wicked being like “chaff that the wind drives away.” In both images there is a process of growing, maturing, prospering. Like the mutual abiding of branches and vine, so the trees are planted deep into the moist soil, and the living water courses through the branches and leaves. And the chaff being winnowed away from the good grain by the wind reminds us of the pruning that happens in our lives as we mutually abide with God. Yolanda Norton says this psalm: “reminds us of our capacity to be skeptics who scoff at the desire for meaning in life. The author offers an alternative path that propels us down a path of discovery alongside God.” [workingpreacher.org]

So, how is our Grace Mennonite Church organizing itself to be a reliable witness of Jesus the shepherd, Jesus the true vine? How are we leaning on divine guidance, trusting God's ability to speak through the Holy Spirit? How are we loving the neighbour? Well, in the midst of a covid lockdown, which is a form of protection offered to citizens by the civil government, we are still shepherding the local flock by accepting the civil regulations during the pandemic. And we continue to shepherd our Grace flock through our service of music, our recorded services, devotionals, and People Care Network. And we contribute to shepherding the flock beyond Grace by our various faithful mission contributions. How is Grace discerning that the Spirit speaks in our midst? Many of us know this through our personal experience of prayer. But our preaching ministry also strives to be Spirit led. Our Preaching Team meets to discern a theme for a series of sermons, following the lectionary and committing ourselves to a version of community discernment, waiting on God's Spirit to speak to us. Once the theme emerges, we each individually have to wrestle and dance with the readings as we prepare our sermons, allowing the Good News to Spring Up. As the references I've made today to Doug and Beth's recent reflections attest, I'm confident the Spirit speaks within Grace Mennonite.

Amen

Hymn of Response:

"Renew Your Church"

[VT #717]

*Renew your church, its ministries restore, both to serve and adore.
Make it again as salt throughout the land, and as light from a stand.
'Mid somber shadows of the night, where greed and hatred spread their blight,
O send us forth with pow'r endued. Help us, God, be renewed.*

*Teach us your word, reveal its truth divine; on our path let it shine.
Tell of your works, your mighty acts of grace; from each page show your face.
As you have loved us, sent your Son, and our salvation now is won,
O let our hearts with love be stirred. Help us, God, know your word!*

*Teach us to pray, for you are always near. Your still voice let us hear.
Our souls are restless till they rest in you, where we find strength anew.
Before your presence keep us still, that we may find for us your will,
and seek your guidance ev'ry day. Teach us, Christ, how to pray!*

*Teach us to love with heart and mind and soul. You, O Christ, be our goal.
Break down old walls of prejudice and hate. Leave us not to our fate.
As you have loved and giv'n your life to end hostility and strife,
O share your grace from heav'n above. Teach us, Christ, how to love!*

Benediction:

[Doug Schulz]

Our benediction today is from the writings of Jan Richardson in her book “In the Sanctuary of Women”:

May God,
who comes to us
in the things of this world,
bless your eyes
and be in your seeing.

May Christ,
who looks upon you
with deepest love,
bless your eyes
and widen your gaze.

May the Spirit,
who perceives what is
and what may yet be,
bless your eyes
and sharpen your vision.

May the Sacred Three
bless your eyes
and cause you to see.

Sending Hymn:

“The Lord Lift You Up”

[VT #832]

*The Lord lift you up, the Lord take your hand,
the Lord lead you forth, and cause you to stand,
secure in God’s word, seeking God’s face,
abounding in love, abiding in grace.*