

**Prelude:****[Annie Schulz]****Gathering thoughts:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to worship with Grace Mennonite Church as we enter the month of May. We continue our Easter through Pentecost series theme, “Good News is Springing Up”, and we again thank our musicians and technicians for their service. Today’s reflection will be presented by Beth Woelk; Beth will speak about the indwelling life of Spirit that we experience in connection to the life of Jesus that calls us together to be alive in this world as we strive to make our lifetime an experience of goodness and grace.

This past week on Tuesday, Beth and Annie and I were privileged to take part in a very small gathering of the family of Hertha and George Janzen as together we honoured George’s almost 92 years of life – he died on Friday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> - in a memorial time held at Tallman Funeral Home in Vineland. We were so very blessed as we heard George’s children talk about his strong life values expressed in “the three Fs” – friendships, family, and... fishing! We all know how George loved to gather a crew together here at Grace to prepare a breakfast or a banquet for a fellowship time that often connected to fund-raising for great causes, such as our grand piano about ten years ago, and our launch of the Syrian refugee sponsorship program in 2016. His family shared about all the ways he blessed them including non-preachy means of practicing his faith - such as holding no judgements on people (“he never made differences”). And he loved the fishing trips so much... the last thing George said to me in person a couple months ago when I met him outside the office doors was, “I’m hoping to get strong enough again to have one more fishing trip with those kids!”

That was just not going to happen. George’s bone marrow cancer and weakened heart did not permit. Today, in respect of our sadness and reverence in this time of farewell to our dear brother and friend who loved this church and served it well, the Call to Worship and Opening Prayer are adapted from words I used at George’s family service, which are taken from the wonderfully thoughtful writings of Joyce Rupp and the Upper Room Press *Guide to Prayer*.

**Call to Worship:** Come, people, into a time of honouring the presence of God in our lives and in our deaths. We honour today what we know, that God’s will for us is for our happiness, our peace of mind and heart. God does not want us to suffer life’s hurts, but God does allow suffering to happen as we are given freedom of choice as to how we will express the gift of life within our human condition.

So we come to worship God admitting that accidents happen, death does come to us all, and disease is prevalent in our world, but God is not doing those things to us. We come as humble, finite human beings living on an earth where natural disasters

occur, where genetic conditions exist, where we sometimes make poor or sinful choices, where life does not always work as we had planned and hoped it would.

So we come today both blessed and burdened with our humanity, with the mystery of growing into a wholeness of personhood which involves continual goodbyes. We come to God and to each other as we are, frail and unfinished, subject always to the possibility of pain as we live in a world where we know we cannot escape our own mortality, our final goodbye before the eternal hello.

Come to our loving God and faithful Guide today with all of our honest hellos and goodbyes, and our hearts full of sadness but also joy. Come with gratitude for each day of life, and for the gift of grace through life and on into the forever space into which one day we all shall go. Come, and know that God is good, and that God calls us to live for the good, every day of our lives, while we have time.

**Prayer:** O God, sovereign Lord over all creation, without whom all purposes are futile, grant us today the assistance of your Spirit. In all the surprises and changes of life, may we fix our hearts upon you, so that your eternal purposes may be fixed in us. In the name of Jesus, who came to make your eternal purpose clear. AMEN

**Scripture: Psalm 22:25-31**

- 25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.  
May your hearts live forever!
- 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.
- 28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
and he rules over the nations.
- 29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.
- 30 Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,
- 31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.

**Hymn:**

**“You are holy”**

**[Voices Together #61]**

*You are holy, you are whole. You are always ever more than we ever understand. You are always at hand.*

*Blessed are you coming near. Blessed are you coming here to your church in wine and bread, raised from soil, raised from dead.*

*You are holy, you are wholeness, you are present, let the cosmos praise you Lord! Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. Amen.*

**Prayers of the People:**

**[Doug Schulz]**

As we continue to remember George Janzen and pray for Hertha and their family in a particular way today, and as we realize that we are living in the season of the resurrection, I will read for our Prayers of the People time a dynamic, modern “Good News is springing up!” poem written by a worship resource person named Gerard Kelly. I think George would have liked this piece.

**Because He is Risen**

Because He is risen  
Spring is possible  
In all the cold hard places  
Gripped by winter  
And freedom jumps the queue  
To take fear’s place as our focus  
Because He is risen

Because He is risen  
My future is an epic novel  
Where once it was a mere short story  
My contract on life is renewed in perpetuity  
My options are open-ended  
My travel plans are cosmic  
Because He is risen

Because He is risen  
Healing is on order and assured  
And every disability will bow  
Before the endless dance of his ability  
And my grave too will open  
When my life is restored  
For this frail and fragile body  
Will not be the final word on my condition  
Because He is risen

Because He is risen  
Hunger will go begging in the streets  
For want of a home  
And selfishness will have a shortened shelf-life  
And we will throng to the funeral of famine  
And dance on the callous grave of war  
And poverty will be history  
In our history  
Because He is risen

And because He is risen  
A fire burns in my bones  
And my eyes see possibilities  
And my heart hears hope  
Like a whisper on the wind  
And the song that rises in me  
Will not be silenced  
As life disrupts  
This shadowed place of death  
Like a butterfly under the skin  
And death itself  
Runs terrified to hide  
Because He is risen

May our lives be full of the fire of hope and the songs of life as we worship and serve God, as Jesus did, day by day, all the way. In Jesus' name. AMEN

**Hymn: "Jesus calls us here to meet him" [VT #30]**

*Jesus calls us here to meet him as, through word and song and prayer,  
we affirm God's promised presence where Christ's people live and care.  
Praise the God who keeps each promise; praise the Son who calls us friends;  
praise the Spirit who, among us, to our hopes and fears attends.*

*Jesus calls us to confess him Word of Life and Lord of all,  
sharer of our flesh and frailness saving all who fail or fall.  
Tell his holy human story; tell his tales that all may hear;  
tell the world that Christ in glory came to earth to meet us here.*

*Jesus calls us to each other: vastly different though we are;  
race and color, class and gender neither limit nor debar.  
Join the hand of friend and stranger; join the hands of age and youth;  
join the faithful and the doubter in their common search for truth.*

**Scripture:****John 15:1-8****[Beth Woelk]**

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

**Reflection:****“I am the Vine”****[Beth Woelk]**

Sixteen years ago I had the joy and privilege of travelling to Italy. When Eric and I travel we like to journey off the beaten path into the lesser-known corners of places and on this trip we found ourselves in the quaint villages of the Cinque Terre that sit upon steep cliffs overlooking the Ligurian Sea. One day as I was walking a hillside path I passed by an elderly gentleman stooped over his vines. I watched him carefully assessing and tending his soon to be harvested grapes. His contentiousness and care moved me and turned my thoughts to Jesus’ teaching of the vine and branches. I reflected on how the Holy One tends us with great care - inviting us to live our lives in intimate union with our Source - hoping that our lives will bear abundant fruit.

Today’s gospel passage presents us with such rich imagery - another one of Jesus’ “*I am*” metaphors. Last week Doug explored Jesus’ words “*I am the good as Shepherd*”. In his relevant and inspiring devotional “Shepherd in the City” Doug’s image of Jesus “as rough and ready Shepherd ever present in the crash and crush of the hard edged realities of our world” brought alive this “*I am*” metaphor in a new way for me. And this week John’s gospel gives us another of Jesus’ “*I am*” metaphors. As we explore the rich imagery of this passage together I pray that we will hear the good news within Jesus’ words and take away fresh insights, hope and encouragement as we seek to take this good news to heart in a way that it springs up within us and flows out from us into the world.

*“I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...”* (John 15:5) Jesus says make your home in me and I will make my home in you. He uses this beautiful image of inter-abiding to emphasize that just as the same life surges through all parts of a plant, the life of God surges through all beings. There is no separation between humans and God and between humans and humans, because of this mutual inter-abiding. This image expresses the ever-

present and indivisible reality of Divine Love. Modern day mystic, episcopal priest and writer Cynthia Bourgeault writes about it this way “We flow into God—and God into us—because it is the nature of Love to flow. And as we give ourselves into one another in this fashion, the vine gives life and coherence to the branch while the branch makes visible what the vine is. (After all, a vine is merely an abstraction until there are actual branches to articulate its reality.) The whole and the part live together in mutual, loving reciprocity, each belonging to the other and dependent on the other to show forth the fullness of love.” This is Jesus’ vision of the connection, sustenance and beauty of life in union with him.

What amazingly good news that we are invited to live our lives intimately joined to his. We can tap into this love and connectedness as a branch to it’s vine. This inter-abiding is a relationship. This relationship may have many struggles, crooked paths, and hidden corners but at the core there is a bond that is deep and strong. It is vital that we protect and nurture this bond so that it thrives and gives vitality and vibrancy to our life. So how do we tend this relationship?

As I was writing this sermon I started thinking about the ways that we nourish our long term relationships. How do we protect and nurture the bonds of marriage or shared life with others in ways that are mutually life-giving? I thought of George and Hertha Janzen who would have celebrated 70 years of marriage this October and how they shared with me that they talked everything through together. All the ups and downs, crossroads and decisions, struggles and joys of a shared life. In these tender days of grief and letting go, Hertha has reminded me about the power of prayer and deep surrender to God. I would suggest that this is one of the primary ways that we protect and nurture our relationship with Christ - talk everything through together. As the old hymn says “Take it to the Lord in prayer”. What a friend we have in Jesus, someone to surrender our longings and desires to. I’ve been inspired by Hertha’s descriptions of the life that she and George shared together. She has reminded me that although we don’t always understand why God allows certain things to happen in our lives, we are always supported, always sustained.

Throughout all the seasons of our life, can we trust the Vine Grower to lovingly prop up, prompt, protect, and prune us for maximum growth and abundance? We have some seasoned vine growers in our congregation who would tell us that the purpose of pruning is not so that we get as many bunches of grapes as possible but so that we end up with quality bunches that are healthy and tasty. No wonder Jesus talks about pruning the fruitful branches. Perhaps fruitfulness is not about spreading our energy far and wide so that we produce lots of little probably tasteless grapes but rather about focusing our energy into fruit that has integrity and sweetness as we make visible the love of Christ that flows through us.

One of the pieces of good news in all of this is that our spiritual growth and fruitfulness doesn't depend on us. Although it certainly takes some effort on our part and we do need to give ourselves to the process, we cannot force growth to happen. This is God's realm of doing. We can yearn for transformation. We can be faithful to pay attention and align ourselves daily with the Source of Love. But ultimately transformation, growth and fruitfulness are a gift and a grace. So when we are tempted to try to measure the "results" of our prayers, our inner work, and our service, let us remember Christ's invitation to abide and to receive. John 15 in The Passion Translation reads "*...live your life intimately joined to mine. I am the sprouting vine and you're my branches. As you live in union with me as your source, fruitfulness will stream from within you...*"

I am reading Neil Douglas-Klotz' book Prayers of the Cosmos. A book of reflections on the original meaning of Jesus' words as translated from the poetic and symbolic language of Aramaic. This book has profoundly influenced my understanding and experience of what we call "The Lord's Prayer". In the line of The Lord's Prayer that we have translated in the King James Version as "*Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*" Douglas Klotz points to imagery in the Aramaic that reflects the same images that Jesus presents in the vine and branches teaching. Images of an inter-abiding life union, an inseparable connection to the Source, a relationship where God's will becomes our will, God's longing becomes our longing. In Aramaic the word "will" carries the meaning "desire" and Douglas-Klotz translates the phrase "Thy will be done" as "Your one desire then acts with ours". To me this explains or deepens the meaning of the line in our John passage this morning. "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." When God's desire becomes our desire this is what we wish for - what God wishes for - and this then is how we pray and how we discern our next steps and our actions in the world.

Our deep connection to the Source clarifies our goals and energizes our next steps. When we abide in God as God abides in us, our will and desires join intimately with God's so that we move together in harmony more often. We are energized to love beyond our own ideals and to sprout acts of compassion for all creatures. We are pruned of the things that get in the way of fruit that is healthy and sweet.

As you reflect on your own life this Spring...

Are there branches that the Holy One might want to prune away so that they do not sap energy from what will become tasty fruit?

Some of us may feel frustrated or guilty about what we can't do with our aging bodies, fatigue, or limitations during this pandemic time. This can result in discouragement, inertia or apathy. Perhaps there is an invitation to draw close to

Jesus our vine and receive the rest, sustenance and encouragement you are longing for?

Some of us busy ourselves with many things that like wild vines grow in confusing directions. Are there things that the loving Vine Grower might want to remove so that the sweetness of Christ's love flows more effectively from us into the broken world in which we live?

What areas of love and service in your life feel most likely to bear healthy fruit over the next year?

What are one or two acts of compassion for a neighbour, a family member or friend, or for yourself that you could commit to this week?

This week as you take a walk, tend your garden, or look out the window into the great greening and blossoming of Spring all around, may you remember that this same creative energy pulses in your veins, may you remember that you have a Loving Grower who tends your life with great care.

Learning to abide in Christ is a life-long journey of growth and transformation, of talking through everything with Jesus, and of trusting in God's love and life-giving presence for every stage of life. In this Easter season what a joy we have in knowing that in our living and in our dying we are intimately joined, nurtured and held in Christ the Vine. Amen

**Hymn of Response:                      "O Blessed Spring"                      [VT #522]**

*O blessed spring, where word and sign embrace us into Christ the Vine:  
here Christ enjoins each one to be a branch of this lifegiving Tree.*

*Through summer heat of youthful years, uncertain faith, rebellious tears,  
sustained by Christ's infusing rain, the boughs will shout for joy again.*

*When autumn cools and youth is cold, when limbs their heavy harvest hold,  
then through us, warm, the Christ will move with gifts of beauty, wisdom, love.*

*As winter comes, as winter must, we breathe our last, return to dust;  
still held in Christ, our souls take wing and trust the promise of the spring.*

*Christ, holy Vine, Christ, living Tree, be praised for this blest mystery;  
that work and water thus revive and join us to your Tree of life.*

**Benediction:**

[Beth Woelk]

May God bless you and keep you;  
may the very face of God shine upon you  
and be gracious to you.  
May God's presence embrace you  
And give you peace. Amen.

**Sending Hymn: "In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified"**

[VT #754]

*In my life, Lord, be glorified; be glorified.  
In my life, Lord, be glorified today.*

*In our song, Lord, be glorified; be glorified.  
In my song, Lord, be glorified today.*

*In your church, Lord, be glorified; be glorified.  
In your church, Lord, be glorified today.*

*In your world, Lord, be glorified; be glorified.  
In your world, Lord, be glorified today.*