

Prelude: "Word of God" (medley) [Annie Schulz]

Gathering Thoughts and Call to Worship: [Beth Woelk]

Welcome here on this lovely late summer Sunday! I am grateful to be with you on this first Sunday in September, our final Sunday exploring the theme "Horizons of Hope". Next week we will begin a new series that will take us into the Fall entitled "Walking Humbly Toward God".

It is good to be together and yet respectfully apart as people who show care and kindness by following public health protocols in this pandemic time. Welcome to those listening or reading from home. We are thankful for Ted Kopp our trusted sound and recording engineer.

As we worship together, we look forward to the ever-thoughtful music selections, chosen and led by Annie Schulz and presented with Grace Singers. Our pastor Doug Schulz will encourage and inspire us with his reflection on "Higher Hopes". And I, Beth Woelk will lead us in our worship time together.

Let us join our hearts in the sanctuary of this beautiful time and space.

Let us pause and reflect.

Let us realign with our commitment to follow the way of Christ.

Let us invite the Spirit to infuse and empower.

Let us praise and worship our Creator!

Prayer: [Beth Woelk]

Generous God,
Through your son, Jesus Christ,
You have shown us what it means to love.
And you call us to follow Your example –
To love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

Continue to write your law of love on our hearts.
Give us an unwavering passion for justice,
a tenacious faith that will not rest,
until the hungry are fed,
the oppressed find relief,
and the outsider finds welcome. Amen

Written by Christine Longhurst, for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Hymn: (standing) "For the beauty of the earth" [HWB #89]

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night;
hill and vale and tree and flow'r, sun and moon and stars of light:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of ear and eye, for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For thy church that evermore lifteth holy hands above,
off'ring up on every shore her pure sacrifice of love:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

Passing of the Peace and Prayers of the People [Beth Woelk]

Remain standing if you are able and while staying in place where you are I invite you to turn to one another and to offer symbols of peace and warm waves of friendship and love. Notice who is here around you. Look into their smiling eyes.

Please be seated and Ted will pause our recording so that we can share our joys and concerns with one another in the comfort and confidentiality of this gathering time.

Loving God,
God of laughter and promises,
Source of Joy, Source of Hope: hear our prayers.
We lift up the concerns and joys that we have shared with one another.
Remind us of your presence already at work within and all around us.

In the calm of this beautiful space, we are mindful of those who do not know the beauty of friendship and community, the provision of daily bread, the peace of living without violence of war. We lift up to you those people around the world who suffer this day - the poor, the hungry, those facing the threat of disease. We lift up those places around the world torn apart by war and conflict or by natural disaster and even as we lift them up to you - we know that you are already there, compassionate and strong. Help us to follow your example and help as we can. Use our gifts and offerings to build your Kin-dom of Love.

In the calm of this beautiful space, we are mindful of those in our community who are filled with worry and anxiety - about their health and the health of those they love; about work or finances; about their children or grandchildren's well-being. We lift up all who are anxious and even as we lift them up - we know that you are already with them, the still small voice in the midst of the storm.

In the calm of this beautiful space, we give you thanks for this time together, for this time set apart for worship. We raise to you our hymn of grateful praise for the goodness in our lives and for growth in times of struggle. We lift up to you our sorrows and that which we cannot name aloud. We lift up our hearts and even as we lift our hearts to you - we know that you have and will continue to hold us.

Loving God,
God of laughter and promises,
Source of Joy, Source of Hope:
Hear us now as we pray the words that Jesus taught us to pray:

“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

Inspired by “Sunday Morning Prayer” by Beth Merrill Neel

Scripture: Psalm 119:33-40 [Beth Woelk]

- 33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
- 35 Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
- 36 Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
- 37 Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
- 38 Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
- 39 Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
- 40 See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

Hymn: “The word of God is solid ground” [HWB #314]

The word of God is solid ground, our constant firm confession,
no source of freedom more profound, no purer a profession.
All steadfast strength, all breadth and length of truth, from God’s word
springing shall we employ to speak our joy this world our witness bringing.

What powers can our faith constrain? What iron-clad restrictions?
No self-deceiving rule can chain our conscience and convictions.
Our God alone in on the throne, and we are subjects willing.
Our lives obey God's higher way; our love God's law fulfilling.

What God-word brings, may we embrace; success and suffering greet us;
confronting evil face to face, as scorn and anger meet us.
For freedom's sake we bend, we break, a sign to every nation
that we have found a solid ground; God's word our sure foundation.

Scripture: Romans 13:8-14 [Doug Schulz]

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Reflection: "Higher Hopes" [Doug Schulz]

When I was a youngster in Saskatchewan, on summer days when the sky turned very dark my farmer father and I would sit on a wooden bench on our covered porch as we watched storms approach, then swirl and rage around us, and eventually pass over and fade away. In spite of lightning flashing and thunder roaring, I felt safe. My father was no fool... he knew severe winds or hail could do tremendous damage, particularly to our crop yield, our livelihood. But my dad had an inherent trust in God the Creator and God the Provider. And I, feeling loved by my father in a secure place on the porch, learned to think of God mostly in happy, hopeful ways.

The storm of COVID-19 has been churning around us for half a year now. We're fools if we don't take seriously the dangers and the unknowns. But we are wise to be reassured that the ways of God for us in this world do not change in any circumstance, pleasant or dire. We are called to listen to, to look for, and to live according to, the "Word" that God gives us to direct our lives at all times. Realizing daily God's presence as our higher hope in life, we survive and thrive even in the hardest hours as we walk God's way on our life path.

One of the rich blessings of the faith journey is that we are life-long students in the school of experience. Of course, not everyone likes the thought of being in school. Soon, in spite of COVID potentially lurking, most children will be back in school. Everyone is a bit nervous. Can children be made to feel secure, and eager to learn and grow? This week I read about a teacher who made a checklist of guidelines for every class. She committed herself to: 1) Keep them safe; 2) Lower their anxiety; 3) Make them laugh; 4) Make them feel loved; 5) Teach them something. What a powerful, hopeful vision for doing well in the school of life! When the world takes our sense of confidence and joy down low, lift others above. Give to others higher hope.

Our summer theme for sermon reflections has been “Horizons of Hope”. Today’s lection texts inspire us toward ever higher horizons, better ways of thinking, in spite of the down-times of these Pandemic Days. Listen again to some Scriptural teachings:

From Psalm 119: Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.

From Romans 13: Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

At the risk of over-simplifying, we can say that in harsher times, even as in better times, faith commands, faith stimulates, faith guides us to pursue accomplishments in love. That is, no matter what path we are on, if we claim to walk with God, it’s a journey where we listen to Love’s voice – God’s word, God’s way, God’s will – in our conscience and in our intellect and in our emotional energy-core. In short, faith is always about commitment to the higher path of love through thick and thin. Robert Browning famously wrote about the work of artists long ago, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” Well, we are called to grasp, to reach, to extend ourselves for Love!

This higher hopeful path of love is what we aim to experience both within the church community and in our lives and relationships ‘out in the world’ so to say. Let’s focus a moment on what I’ll call life inside the family of faith. I’ve asked Annie to have the singers present to us a great hymn that puts our focus on the high hope of knowing God better through the practice of love together.

“Where charity and love prevail” [HWB #305] [Tune is #306]

Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found;
brought here together by Christ’s love, by love are we thus bound.

With grateful joy and holy fear true charity we learn.
Let us with heart and mind and strength now love Christ in return.

Forgive we now each other's faults as we our faults confess,
and let us love each other well in Christian holiness.

Let us recall that in our midst dwells God's begotten Son.
As members of his body joined, we are in Christ made one.

Love can exclude no race or creed if honored be God's name.
Our common life embraces all whose Maker is the same.

This 1200-year-old hymn demonstrates that the church's definition and mission has always been to galvanize unity in a commitment to "true charity" where we learn to accept one another in spite of differences. Our common purpose is to open doors to everyone in the world in the name of Christ. Quite a challenge! But the enduring task is to be an engaged community of servants of God in Christ practicing love and sharing that dynamism in the world.

This is not easy, and as many of us know, divisiveness in church families and in our own families causes so much sadness, anger, frustration, and lingering pain. And there is so much friction and fractiousness in our wider world with disagreements about political and social theory and practice. We'd be naïve to believe that simply having sentimental affection for everyone could make hurts in our relationships dissolve into nothing, or would instantly solve problems of poverty, racism, or war. But the practice of love does call us to stand together for goodness in the world, even though we may be people bearing relational wounds, and even with opposing perspectives on politics and social programs. Our biblical texts remind us we are "joined" in Christian community to show the world that love in action is always the highest hope.

Believing that the law of love can be our guide forward is the work of our lifetimes. Yes, the practice of love is pretty practical, pretty immediate, pretty constant. And we therefore appreciate that the littlest bit of love does make a difference – love motivates relationships to work things out, stimulates a congregation of whatever size or age to keep focused on its common mission. Love leads us always to higher hopes.

Now, briefly... Beyond our church life, how exactly do we show love in our lives in the world in practical, effective ways? A friend of mine once told me the evidence of our Christian life will be revealed in the way we drive home from church. In a world where self-absorbed busyness all too often makes people bluster about with belligerent attitudes, to be a courteous, safe, respectful driver is actually a loving act. My police officer son would remind me to tell some seniors that giving up their license to drive is also a good thing, eventually.

In the bigger picture of living with loving hope in the world, we know many people's lives – some far away, and some not that far from our safe homes - are marked by

poverty and deprivation caused by injustice or the breakdown of peace. I firmly believe that even though I may have uncertainties about the stability of our political or economic systems these days, I am called to care about the 'less fortunate'. It was Tommy Douglas who said: "We are all in this world together, and the only test of our character that matters is how we look after the least fortunate among us." Our upcoming fall sermon series, called "Walking Humbly Toward God" will examine various examples of ways we can be attuned to walking with God toward higher ground in terms of some of the peace and justice concerns near to home or around the world.

The world can only improve if more people truly believe and practice that form of self-assessment which measures our value - and shapes our values – in what we also do to help others. In the end, my worth is not measured only by what I've accomplished, but by how I've used my possessions or power for others on the way toward their higher hopes. I have been inspired for a dozen years now by what I witness of that sort of motivation in this congregation - our recent refugee sponsorship efforts are just the latest example. Let's keep it up. Giving. Praying. Helping where we have time and strength. With refugees. MCC. MDS. The Centre4Women. Do what we can, while we can. And always with open hearts to learn more about love.

Poet Lynn Unger wrote in her poem called "Pandemic" that we need to...

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

We live in "pandemic times". It's not pleasant, and the future is uncertain. We hope things will change for the better soon. Meanwhile, we live with the vision of our high calling to practice the will and way and word of God's love as shown by Jesus in this world. It's an ongoing journey, and it gives us higher hope all the time, so that we can say, as Laura Kelly Fanucci of St. John's University proclaims:

When this ends
may we find
that we have become
more like the people
we wanted to be
we were called to be
we hoped to be
and may we stay
that way — better
for each other
because of the worst.

Amen.

Hymn of Response: “Help us to help each other” [HWB #362]

Help us to help each other, Lord, each other’s load to bear,
that all may live in true accordance, our joys and pains to share.

Help us to build each other up, your strength within to prove.
Increase our faith, confirm our hope, and fill us with your love.

Together make us free indeed – your life within us show,
and into you, our living Head, let us in all things grow.

Drawn by the magnet of your love we find our hearts made new.
Nearer each other let us move, and nearer still to you.

Benediction: Doug Schulz [II Thessalonians 2:16,17 Inclusive Bible]

16 May our Saviour Jesus Christ and our Abba God - who loved us and in mercy gave us eternal consolation and hope - 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them for every good work and word.

Sending Hymn: “Healer of our every ill” [HWB #377, vv. 1 & 3]

Healer of our every ill, Light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.
You who know our fears and sadness,
grace us with your peace and gladness.
Spirit of comfort, fill our hearts.

Healer of our every ill, Light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.
Give us strength to love each other, every sister, every brother.
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide.