

Prelude: Annie Schulz

Gathering Thoughts: David Brubacher

Good morning! Welcome to this time of worship! Waiting seems to be the name of the game these days. We wait for the day when we can safely gather here in this space with sisters and brothers of our Grace family. We wait to hug our loved ones. We wait to enjoy the outdoors without fear. But in the meantime, we isolate ourselves and we wait.

As we continue in the season of Eastertide, we journey with Jesus' disciples as THEY tried to make sense of the resurrection. They had some powerful moments with Jesus in his resurrection glory. No sooner did they feel like they understood what was going on, that Jesus began to suggest he would be leaving them. After his leaving, they were to wait in Jerusalem until they would receive what God had promised. So, like the disciples we wait.

We wait to observe the Ascension of Jesus next Sunday and Pentecost the following Sunday. In the meantime, we ponder, as the disciples must have, what it means to faithfully live into this new thing we are experiencing. As we wait, we praise God for the goodness that surrounds us. May our waiting prepare us for faithful post COVID-19 living!

As in previous weeks, the music selected for today is from the public domain. Our musicians are Annie Schulz and Julie Plunkett. Community Chaplain, Jan Steven will offer a reflection. Our sound technician is Ted Kopp, and I am Pastor David Brubacher, leading the service today. In keeping with the COVID-19 regulations, we are the only people in the sanctuary here at Grace this Thursday morning.

Call to Worship: HWB #659

Leader: Grace to you and peace from God,
who was and who is and who is to come,

**People: and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness,
the first born of the dead, ruler above all rulers of the earth.**

Leader: In love Jesus Christ suffered death to free us from our sins,

People: making all who confess Christ a nation of priests set aside for God's service.

All: To Jesus Christ be glory and power forever and ever.

Prayer:

Creator God, it feels like we are standing in the middle of stark contrasts. We marvel at the beauty of your creation in the Spring season. New life blossoms all around. Yet we linger, and we wait, for the shadow of COVID-19 to lift. In the meantime, we focus our eyes on the horizon

of beauty with which you created all things. In our worship, mold us into the image of your beauty so that we reflect the presence of Jesus in your new creation. AMEN.

Hymn:

All things bright and beautiful HWB #156

*All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.*

*Each little flow'r that opens, each little bird that sings,
God made their glowing colors, God made their tiny wings.*

*The purple-headed mountain, the river running by,
the sunset, and the morning that brightens up the sky;*

*The cold wind in the winter, the pleasant summer sun,
the ripe fruits in the garden, God made them ev'ry one.*

*God gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell
how great is God almighty, who has made all things well.*

*All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.*

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 NRSV

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor^[a] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God^[b] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we too are his offspring.'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

This is the word of the Lord!

Prayers of the People: Written by Doug Schulz; presented by Julie Plunkett & Annie Schulz

O God of Love and Life, we lift up our spirits with gratitude
for all you are and all that you do, especially for lovingkindness you provide to us,
even as we sometimes wonder with concern and fear about our world today.
So we humble ourselves and open our hearts and minds now to you, to receive your peace.

Lord, hear our prayer

We thank you for all that keeps us safe and supported:
For family or friends who call to check up or to cheer us on;
for those who bring meals, groceries or treats,
and those who share books or shows for entertainment and inspiration;
for health care and community service providers, for leaders in government circles;
for the prevailing spirit of cooperation and community care in our land of peace and order.
We express now our gratefulness for all of it!

Lord, hear our prayer

We confess to you, O God, that at times we take the goodness in our lives for granted
even as we don't try hard enough for a deeper understanding of inequities in our world.
We limit our compassion, and we excuse ourselves for narrowness of concern or vision.
We admit that it is hard to love like you loved, to give like you gave, to see with your eyes.
We confess our need for you to open the windows and doors of heart and mind.

Lord, hear our prayer

O God, we do have deep love and concern for some people we know today.
We think of those who are suffering from illnesses of various kinds,
of those who are waiting to have some necessary medical help,
of those who are recovering from treatment or surgery.
We remember those who are grieving losses, including the loss of opportunity for a funeral.
We hold in our hearts all who struggle in spirit in any way these days
and we freely admit we are all needing your power and your peace.

Lord, hear our prayer

Finally, O God, we offer up, for these things and all other concerns that are in us today,

as sacrificial Christians, I expect he coined this phrase after he became Lutheran – a more pragmatic denomination of Christianity. 😊

#2 “In the blink of an eye everything can change. So forgive often and love with all your heart. You may not have that chance again.” This is from Zig Ziglar – a sales master and a Baptist. Perhaps you don’t see the two as going together, but I do. He was a successful evangelizer. He knew how to pitch things.

But I have other mottos that I have accumulated throughout the years. Here are two of them:

#3. If you want to know what people believe, see how they live - ie see how they spend their time, money, and skills.

#4. Speak to people in a language they understand. And hopefully they can respond to.

When I looked over the four lectionary readings – multiple times – there were two sets of verses that especially stood out to me.

The first is from Jesus – John 14 vs 15 and v21.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

The second is from Paul – Acts 17 vs 22 & 23

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

17:23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

So, mission statement #3. If you want to know what people believe, see how they live i.e. see how they use their time, money, and skills.

The verse “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” is for me directly related to the statement just made.

When I was a student counselor at Laurentian university, I would ask people - at the end of the first appointment - to keep a week-long hourly time sheet for the next week – documenting how they spent their time. I could tell who was sincere about their self-care and their studies – just by looking at it this chart.

At tax time, I review my bank and MasterCard statements to see if I've missed a charitable donation. It is also a review of how we spend out money. I send all our financial stuff to Eric at Niagara Warehouse of Hope. He calculates our income tax stuff for Rev Canada and we give a donation to the Warehouse – a mission both Laur and I love. If Eric looked through our Mastercard and bank statements, he would know what our values were. How we spent our money.

And I encourage you during this time of Covid 19 lockdown – since you likely have more spare time – to take an unflinching look at how you are spending your time and your money and your TALENTS! And how you plan to do so in the future.

The talents or abilities one is particularly difficult for me. I do want to keep the commandments of Jesus. You and I know the two great commandments – love God and our neighbours.

But there are also other particular requirements. Depending on how you count them, it can be anywhere from six to 1050. (Someone else calculated the larger number.) Here are the most well known though only a few of them.

Feed the hungry
Provide water for the thirsty
House the homeless
Provide adequate clothing
Care for people who are sick
Visit people who are imprisoned.

(They are also known as The Works of Mercy and are from Matthew 25.)

Can a person tell by looking at how I use my time, money, and talent how much I love God? How seriously I serve Jesus. I confess, in this time of covid isolation, I am at a loss on how to serve, since my way of serving has been visiting and feeding. And this could go on for some time so I need to address this.

Mission statement #4. Speak to people in a language they understand. And hopefully they can respond to.

I love how Paul addresses the men of Athens. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." And he continues to both exhort them for faithfulness, at the same time he points them to the One who deserves their faith and worship, Jesus the Son of God.

He even quotes from the 650 BC poet Epimenides. The line *“For in him we live and move and have our being...”* I know, we thought it was Paul. Nope, he’s quoting a pagan – a line that was used specifically in worship unto the Greek God Zeus.

Why do I mention this? Because I am interested in Evangelism – sharing effectively the Good News of Jesus. And it does occur to me that things are best explained to me when someone can say, “You know how... Well, it’s just like that, except for this little step that I’m going to tell you or show you...”

Evangelism is a tricky concept these days. It used to be so easy. In the Mennonite tradition, you “simply” had large families and brought them to church and somehow they automatically became Christian. Menno kids would get Christian education and then normally get baptised as teens or young adults. It was an assumption was that Menno kids would become Christian.

In the United Church tradition, which is where our kids were raised, we didn’t have particularly big families – and UC kids likely had a baptism as a baby that they confirmed in their teen years. (Ours didn’t because of my Brethren background – they had a “blessing”.) But we had programs that brought folks into the United Church and into Christian belief and life. Simple but effective things – youth groups, CGIT – Christian Girls in Training, and Tyros – the boys equivalent. Fall and spring teas. Christmas and Easter Pageants. And these things worked.

But they don’t now. And United Churches are closing down. I was chatting with my hubs Laurence about evangelism and he asked – playing the devil’s advocate, “So why would a person want to be Christian?” I’m all about the “why statement.” In my Plymouth Brethren tradition, the answer was so simple. “To save you from going to hell.”

But now we have different understandings of what hell means and what will get you there! This is true for Conference Mennonites and United Churches and I daresay many other denominations. So why would a person want to be Christian?”

And for me it’s a couple of reasons. Here are two of them.

1. I’m a Red letter Christian. That means, the things that Jesus is reported to have said in the Gospels. I believe them!!! I don’t pretend to understand all of them, but I believe Jesus.
2. I believe that being a follower of Jesus gives me a more meaningful life. And this is true whether one is living in a refugee camp in Kenya or in a senior’s apartment in Canada.

But one has to be very gentle about evangelism or folks will turn us off. Here is a description of two of my attempts.

1. In the last year I was asked by a young person who is currently somewhere between atheist and agnostic – “How can you believe this stuff? Do you really believe in a God who cares about everyone on this planet?”

And my response was – and is – “I have a God-sized hole in my heart. And I have a choice. I can fill it with a whole lot of other things or I can fill it with Jesus.” (And truth be told it’s a bit of a mix and I HOPE JESUS IS THE BIGGEST PART.)

2. The other – I was going through a grocery lineup on a Sunday morning. I apologized to the cashier for shopping on Sunday and explained that I would normally be at church. She asked me which one and it turns out we both know folks at Grace United and Grace Mennonite. She has not been attending her former church (which is not either of the Graces) for a while and I told her “any church would be so very happy to have you attend...”

Was I successful? Unlikely. Was I faithful? Hopefully

As you can see, I don’t have any easy answers on how best to serve and to evangelize. And having some uncertainty is OK. Jesus Himself sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. And Thomas Merton – a prolific and well-know Christian author – struggled just as I do. Possibly, just as you do...

I will close with what is called The Merton Prayer...

Author: Thomas Merton

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you

does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,

though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though

I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,

and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.

Hymn of Response: *Gracious Spirit, dwell with me* HWB #507 vs 1,2

*Gracious Spirit, dwell with me: I my-self would
gracious be, and, with words that help and heal,*

*would thy life in mine reveal, and, with actions
bold and meek, would for Christ my Savior speak.*

*Truthful Spirit, dwell with me: I my-self would
truthful be, and, with wisdom kind and clear,
let thy life in mine appear, and, with actions
lovingly speak my Lord's sincerity*

Benediction:

Redeeming God, in worship you have brought us to a spacious place. By the power of your Holy Spirit, enable us to live in honour of your creation, in devotion to your teaching and in love toward others so that your new creation becomes evident among us. AMEN.

Sending Hymn: ***Gracious Spirit, dwell with me*** HWB #507 vs 4,5

*Mighty Spirit, dwell with me: I my-self would
mighty be, mighty so as to prevail
where unaided I must fail, ever, by a
mighty hope, pressing on and bearing up.*

*Holy Spirit, dwell with me: I my-self would
holy be, break from sin and choose the good,
cherish what my Savior would, whatever
I can be, give to him who gave me thee.*

Postlude: Annie Schulz