

Welcome to Worship

UCC EAST

Service 3

"The true measure of the justice of a system is the amount of protection it guarantees to the weakest."

- Aung San Suu Kyi

PRELUDE

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN SING

WE GATHER AS GOD'S PEOPLE

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come and worship together, the weak and the strong.
God welcomes us with love.

Come and worship together, the brave and the fearful
God welcomes us with love.

Come and worship together, the sad and the joyful
God welcomes us with love.

Come and worship together, the peacemakers and justice seekers
God welcomes us with love.

Come and worship together, the boisterous and the quiet ones

God welcomes us with love, to worship this day. Amen.

*** HYMN:** VU 642: Be Thou My Vision

PRAYER OF APPROACH:

(This prayer has actions. They can be added to the video and you can mirror this in the recording - Start with hands over heart.)

God, we come offering our hearts in this virtual place, hearts open to an encounter with you.

(Move arms and hands to the sides and palms facing up.)

God, as we gather from far and wide, we greet the day with all of it's potential and with hearts open to the communities who gather with us.

(Move arms up above head.)

God, who created the sky, we reach to it, gathering in the light.

(Face palms to the ground and push from above head until they can't lower any further.)

We let go of the stress of this time that stops us from being fully present in our worship,

(move hands in circles, palms still facing down, just at waist level).

and we gather your energy and find our grounding in you.

(Stand again and move hands back over heart.)

This sacred time gathers us together in your name and becomes part of our heart. Amen.

HYMN: VU 296 - This is God's Wondrous World

THEME CONVERSATION:

INVITATION TO CONFESSION

Sometimes we hurt our friends.

Sometimes we hurt ourselves.

Sometimes we hurt God.

Our prayer of confession is a chance to say "We're sorry."

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Gracious God,
thank you for not only the forgiveness you offer to us
but also for being with us when we feel far from safe.
Help us, God, to offer the same patience and kindness to others as
you do with us. Amen.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

God's love has no boundaries.
God's forgiveness has no limitations
God's mercy is ours.
Thanks be to God.

WE LISTEN FOR GOD'S WORD

However we approach the Bible, it confirms our identity as
Christians and provides us with stories and literature through which
God continues to speak. It is through scripture that we frequently
hear the Word of God, naming, calling, challenging and redeeming
us. The Spirit of God uses this literature and metaphors to speak
to our spirits, inviting us into wholeness, renewal and new life. So
now let us listen to ancient words, so the living Word of God might
be heard among us afresh.

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: *Genesis 45:1-15*
Joseph is reunited with his brothers.

RESPONSIVE PSALM: *Psalm 133 (VU p. 856)*
How pleasant it is when God's people are together.

EPISTLE READING: *Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32*
God has not rejected the Hebrews.

ANTHEM:

GOSPEL: *Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28*
A Canaanite mother challenges Jesus.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Many of the stories that come to us are first passed on by
memory, and then by written records of remembrance. Bind these
ancient memories of your voice, O God, to our remembrance of
your presence so that we might live as people who remember you.
Amen

MESSAGE:

That woman!
She is unbelievable!
An annoyance!
Worse, she is embarrassing!
Not just to herself, but to everyone around.

"Jesus, tell her to go away! Jesus, tell her to leave us alone!"

The disciples are recognizable in this story that Matthew has
borrowed from Mark.
Matthew has taken some literary license... Matthew - a Jew -
writing his account of Jesus life and ministry for a Jewish
community, changes the woman's ancestry from Syro-Phoenician to
Canaanite... mainly because his audience, the Jewish community he
is writing for wouldn't know a Syro-Phoenician from a Maritimer...
but they do know the Canaanites...

But, I digress!
We can certainly recognize the disciples in this story. The
disciples are always telling someone to go away, get lost, hit the
road, get outta here.
It is, well, kind of what they do when they want to rest and
someone bugs them.

And they need to rest.
They have just finished feeding 5000 people!
Did you hear me... they had just finished feeding... wait, well, they
did some help. Jesus did help. Probably a lot.

Well, probably Jesus did most of the work... since their first inclination was to tell the people to go away, leave, get outta here...

But Jesus didn't.

Jesus said 'God will provide' and God did.

It's all good.

"Jesus, tell her to go away! Jesus, tell her to leave us alone!"

...and Jesus says that troubling phrase "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Pardon me? What?

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Pause

A few years ago my sister Verna was in the hospital in Moncton. My brother-in-law Bob was there too. And they couldn't go home. They had no home to go to.

Two years before that, we had celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary.

The year before this hospital visit, they sold the house they have lived in for 50 years... the house where they raised their children, saw them married and where they lived out many happy years of retirement and they moved into a retirement home.

But Bob had Parkinsons. He's had it for a long time. His doctors were always amazed at what he could still do and, frankly, that he was still here. Verna, well, she had survived two different cancer battles much to the surprise of everyone. Really they were both very lucky.

But while I was away, Bob fell. And Verna tried to catch him. They both ended up on the floor. Neither one of them could get up.

Verna fractured vertebrae in her back. And now the retirement home has said they can't come back. They need too much care.

And the hospital won't put them in the same room.

And the social workers say they probably won't be in the same nursing home.

And the newspapers call them 'bed blockers' because they have nowhere to go. Nowhere they can be together.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Life is often interrupted by people and situations that are inconvenient. Just take a look around you and there is ample confirmation of that!

They make demands on our time.

They get in the way of our plans.

And we can become very adept at ducking the calls, taking another route home, waiting an extra ten minutes... sometimes even dumping the problem onto someone else's lap.

It's what we have come to expect from the disciples... but it isn't what we expect from Jesus.

This story challenges us.

We are used to seeing Jesus as the straight shooter who doesn't play favorites.

Jesus is the open and loving one who embraces all economic groups, all social classes, all ethnicities, all skin colours.

Even with the weight of the world on his shoulders, Jesus has time for everyone.

Jesus welcomes sinners into his circle.

Outsiders have a place of honor at the table.

Children are invited to sit on his knee..

Even with his eyes set on Jerusalem, Jesus takes time to heal the sick and restore sight to the blind.

But... not here. Not now.

Not this time.

Not in this story.

In the course of their dialogue, Jesus does call the woman a dog.

And while some commentaries try to pretty it up.

It's written... right there.

This is not the man we have come to know and love.

This is not the man who ALWAYS does the right thing.

This is not the Jesus of 'What Would Jesus Do' fame.

This Jesus is ... yikes... more like us.

This woman is not one of the family.

But she doesn't care.

She cares that her child is sick.

And so what if it's a daughter and not a son.

She doesn't.

She kneels at Jesus feet.

She pleads with him.

She refuses to take no for an answer.

There is no way to know what went on in Jesus head that day.

There is no way to know what great epiphany came upon him.

Was he moved by compassion?

Was his mind changed by this woman's devotion to her child?

Did the words of Isaiah come back to him... that God would give the Servant to be "a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49: 6).

The story, as recounted by Matthew, says that it was her faith that changed the course of the story.

But it isn't just this one story but the whole story that is changed by this one encounter with a awkward woman of foreign ancestry in a gentile town.

Because from this point on, Jesus ministry is not just to the lost sheep, not just to the Jewish people of an ancient time and place, from this point on, Jesus ministry is a ministry to all the nations.

Through a painful encounter with a awkward woman, Jesus grows in his self-understanding and accepts a new vision of his mission.

If nothing else, this story is a reminder to us that there is no one outside the circle of

God's love and compassion.

As Jesus walks the roads from Galilee to Jerusalem, people of all descriptions draw near him and follow him.

Righteous people criticize him for eating with sinners, lepers, and tax collectors.

As his new fellowship spreads into the Roman world, Jews and Gentiles do the unheard-of thing of sitting down together and acting like brothers and sisters. The height, breadth, and depth of God's compassion still trouble some people within the church today.

For those who think in terms of scarcity, fear, or suspicion, only limits can keep them safe.

They hoard God's grace, afraid to share it, afraid there won't be enough to go around.

As COVID 19 stretches our limits and the racism alive in our culture alters our social structure in Canada, we are faced with our deeping polarization. People of different political views, economic conditions, ethnic backgrounds and religious convictions are demonized and dismissed.

As our social order in Canada becomes more deeply polarized, it becomes easier to decide whom to exclude from the circle of God's love.

But no one can limit the grace of God.

And if there is something that the church has to offer our shifting society, it is the visible demonstration of how people of different

viewpoints, political parties, and backgrounds not only tolerate one another but love and appreciate each other.

The doors of the church are wide open to the world. Maybe more so than they have been in centuries...

It should always be that way.

How else would we have ever come in?

God speaks through encounters with strangers and in situations outside of our individual comfort zones.

I speak from experience when I say that, as followers of Jesus, we are called upon to decide if we're going to let go of our carefully made plans and well-organized schedules in order to respond to the unwelcome demands that arrive without warning. Unwelcome demands that cause us to put our faith first and our fear and anxiety second. Because these are the moments when God whispers the word a person most needs to hear.

As followers of the way, we learn and grow when we brush up against people whose lives, needs, dreams, and struggles are different from ours.

These encounters are like sandpaper on a piece of rough wood; smoothing the undisciplined edges of life and making us into a new creation; a servant of the living God.

God may disrupt our carefully made plans.

God certainly did for Bob and Verna.

But together they are figuring out a way forward. Looking for God's purpose in their lives now, in this situation. Figuring out, together, what they will do and where they will go. As Bob said to me, "As long as we are together and as long as God gives us life, we will find a way."

Transformation is ours... Just as it was for Jesus.

We can change.

And then we can change the world.

With God's help.

Amen

HYMN: VU 358 - When Jesus the Healer

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING:

Look around at the wonders that God has given... in response to these wonders, we give...

OFFERING OUR GIFTS TO GOD:

DEDICATION: *Roger...mention a few ways to give to the church in this time.*

OFFERTORY PRAYER:

Life-giver, bless these gifts so they may be used to offer feast amidst famine, joy amidst pain, courage amidst fear. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

WE PRAY FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS

Our Holy Friend,

we gather this day as your people from far and wide,
seeking hope in the midst of pandemic.

We know that fear overshadows us,

whether from persecution, greed, hatred, and sadness that seems
all the harder for the times we are living through.

Help us to know that when we are lonely and saddened by this
world,

your heart also breaks.

Remind us that like Joseph and his brothers,

you too weep with us. And so we present our lives to you, knowing
that you will care for them.

As we live through unprecedented times, help us to let go of bitterness and to be open to the ways you are calling us to show mercy and compassion and grace to each other.

We know that there are people in our communities and in our world who are suffering from physical pains as well as pains of the heart. Help us to know how to help. And help us to know that our prayers, our care, and our presence, even at six feet, is better than hopelessly waiting for a better time.

For those places and times that are too hard to say, we share with you now in the silence of our hearts...

(Silence)

We gather all of these prayers, both spoken and in silence, and we offer ourselves to you as we say together the words that Jesus taught his disciples to pray... Our Father, who art in heaven...

Amen.

WE ARE SENT FORTH

* **HYMN:** VU 595: *We Are Pilgrims*

* **COMMISSIONING AND BENEDICTION:**

As you sign off, know that we are all forgiven, all loved, and all chosen people.

Go - living into your fullest self, helping others to do the same.

Go, blessed by God, the mother and father of us all;

the Christ, the one who travels with us;

and the Spirit, who binds us together.

* **CHORAL BENEDICTION:** *Go Now in Peace* - QUC choir

Credits