

May 9, 2021- Christian Family Sunday

Call to Worship

One: Come parents, siblings, friends and neighbours:

Let us sing to the Creator a new song,

All: for God has done marvellous things.

One: Let us make known the God's love,

All: for God's steadfast love covers the whole earth.

One: Let us sing joyful praises,

All: and join all creation to worship our parent-God

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Holy God, the power of your love is beyond comprehension, the breadth of your compassion without measure. In Jesus Christ, you have met us in the midst of life's joys and challenges and shown us what it means to love and be loved. You have entrusted us with the greatest commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us. In this time of worship, we offer you our love and loyalty, seeking to learn more of what love and loyalty mean for us in the midst of our joys and challenges. Receive our prayers and praise, and through the power of your Spirit, draw us closer to you and closer to each other as friends and followers of Christ, our Risen Lord.

Merciful God, we confess we often find it difficult to love others as you commanded. Though we intend to do your will, our priorities lead us in other directions. We seek our own security before the well-being of others. We fulfill our own desires rather than act for the common good. We justify our own interests and fail to understand the cost they take on the earth and other people. Forgive us. Redirect our priorities and renew our commitment to live out your love even when it demands more of us than we expect.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news! Who is in a position to condemn? Not us but only Christ—

And Jesus Christ forgives and we are made new by God's generous grace.

God has loved all of creation, God continues to love us all today, God will love us all tomorrow and each day forever more. Believe the Good News and believe that God's love is unending.

Hymn: #476 Amigos de Cristos

Children's Time

Scriptures

O God of story, in the beginning you created humankind. The Bible contains your story of love and encouragement and challenge, to your creation, to your children, and to us. Today, may our hearts and minds be open to hear what your Spirit is saying to us. We pray. Amen.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made

known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Acts 10:44–11:12a

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.

Sermon by Whitney Hanna

Welcome to worship on this Christian Family Sunday. Christian Family Sunday gives us an opportunity to look beyond our nuclear families and consider what makes a faith community a family. It is also Mother's Day and I wish a warm greeting to anyone celebrating this holiday. I also recognize how difficult Mother's Day is for many people and I hold space for any grief that may be felt.

Within the church, we use the word family a lot. Like the apostles and the earliest disciples, we understand that our places of worship are also supposed to be places of belonging. The lives of many Christians are full of moments where our kinship in Christ is recognized:

We are baptized into the family of God where the whole congregation professes to care for us. We might join a church as a member, professing to continue in that family structure. We attend weddings and funerals. Dinners and bunwich luncheons. We meet on the phone or at coffee hour where we laugh with those who are laughing and we weep with those who are weeping. And meetings. There are opportunities to attend lots and lots of family discussions in meetings!

Just like in our own families, it is easy to get bogged down in the responsibilities of what it means to be in kinship with one another. Seeing each other becomes a little less

joyous when we are stressed or worried that we are not meeting expectations.

As Christians, we have developed many formalities in how we interact with one another. We endeavour to do things properly and in good order. We try so hard to follow all the rules in order to stay in good standing and not lose our place in the family.

But is that really what it means to be part of the family of God? In our reading from Acts we see that the Holy Spirit fell upon *all* who heard the word. All of them. Those who followed all the rules such as circumcision but also those who didn't. Those who were outside of the religious rules also received the Holy Spirit.

So what did Peter do about that? Did he send the rule breakers away anyway? Did he make them attend bible study? Did he tell them to come back when they looked the part?

No, Peter did none of that. Peter saw that the Holy Spirit was available to all these people. Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?' and they were baptized into the family of Christ right then and there! And then the scripture tells us that the people invited Peter to stay with them for several days.

Isn't that an amazing part of the story?

Once all the people, the rule keepers and the rule breakers were accepted together as family in Christ, they stayed in community getting to know one another for several days. What a nice time that might have been, eating and drinking and getting to know new friends.

However, in the next chapter in Acts, Peter returns to Jerusalem and has to answer for his acceptance of those who didn't follow the religious rules. This is where Peter explains his vision of God doing the work to make what is unclean clean. He says that The Spirit told him not to make a distinction between "*them*" and "*us*".

If we were to ask many neighbours in our community if they would feel welcome at a local church, many would tell us no. I have had more conversations than I can count with good, kind people who tell me that church makes them feel uncomfortable. They claim that they would be judged upon entry. They tell me that people at church would tell them that they have too many body piercings, or that they drink too much on a Friday night, or that they ask too many questions or church-goers would be uncomfortable because they are gay, or that they wouldn't be welcome because their children are too rambunctious, or that they would be judged for wearing clothes that weren't good enough.

Whether warranted or not, over the years, the church of Jesus (the good shepherd who cares for every last sheep) has become a place where many people fear exclusion. Rather than feeling welcome in a space that upholds the values that Peter described where there is no distinction between "*us*" and "*them*", many feel that their presence is not welcome.

One of my favourite memories of family welcome happened at Christmas a few years ago. We were at my Dad's house, where my grandma and grandpa once lived before

they both passed away.

It was so noisy. The house was full of aunts, uncles, parents and cousins but also family friends, in-laws, work colleagues and pets. Food and wine were delicious and abundant. My mother in law, (Adam's mum) was in the formal living room comparing tattoos with my cousin's son who I hadn't seen in years. I talked with another of her sons about how I was learning more of the Scottish Gaelic language that was part of our heritage. We had a gift exchange and everyone was included, even those we were meeting for the first time.

We had brought up extra tables from the basement- old card tables that my grandparents used to use for bridge parties with their friends and family. We brought out random chairs and stools and dusted them off. But once everything was covered with table cloths and place settings, it didn't matter much whether or not it matched. It mattered that everyone could sit and eat and enjoy.

People were laughing, singing, debating and it was hot and stuffy. I excused myself outside for a moment and cried. I missed my grandmother who had died earlier that year. I was considering the legacy of all of my ancestors. But mostly, I was suddenly completely overwhelmed by the sensation of family and what it means when there is a place at the table for anyone who wants or needs a seat.

On Christian family Sunday, let us celebrate what it means to be a family! It is a wonderful time to consider all the occasions when we have felt loved, cared for and prayed for by our siblings in Christ.

But let us also consider what our churches would look like if we truly found a seat at the table for everyone. If there truly was no distinction between "us" and "them". If we worried less about what was clean and what was unclean would the church still be a place that some neighbours feel excluded from? If we dusted off old card tables and invited everyone to share in the food, the laughter and the old, old stories would we too be overwhelmed at the sensation of what it is to be part of the family of God?

Hymn: #434 For the Beauty of the Earth

Prayer for the Offering

God has blessed our lives with relationships—joy inspiring and challenging. In response to God's blessings in our lives, we are now invited to share our offerings. Let us pray: Creator God, we offer these gifts so that we might continue to build relationships with one another and with your whole creation. Bless these gifts that they may bring wholeness and life abundance to all your people. We pray in Jesus' name Amen.

Pastoral Prayer (part of this prayer is by The Rev. Jackie Harper)

Holy God, you know us and know what is on our hearts. You know our worries, our fears, and our challenges. You know our health, our loneliness and our needs. You know of the struggles and you know of the joys of your whole creation. We lift our prayers to you.

Holy God, in your mercy and your love, hear our prayer.

Our faith blesses us with stories of others who have sought to live in life-giving relationships. As we remember these siblings in faith, remind us of your guidance and presence with us. Let us pray—

God of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; God of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; God of siblings who cared for one another, offered support and challenge, celebrated together, worked together, argued together, and grieved together. We are thankful for their witness. As they have done may we also seek to live in life-giving relationships with those we would name as siblings.

God of Eli, Hannah, and Samuel: cross-generational colleagues, mentors, and trusted leaders in faith, remind us of the opportunities we have to nurture and care, mentor and discern with one another in this faith community. May we embrace the trust that is offered and shared with respect, care, and humility.

God of Ruth and Naomi: who embraced each other despite differences of race and cultural traditions and chose to be family for one another. For all who choose to be family, may your love and hope be sustained day by day.

God of Simon and Andrew and James and John: who left the familiar to build new community with Jesus and his followers. Though faithful, they had moments of doubt, of fear, of denial. In our moments of doubt, fear, and denial, may we remember to trust and to take one step at a time.

God of Hagar, Abraham, and Ishmael; God of Sarah, Abraham, and Isaac: God of the complicated, and the jealous, and the broken, remind us that this too is real and that you walk with us through these troubling times.

God of Mary and John: called to relationships that stretch beyond blood, to care for each other. You invite us too to reach out in welcome, support, and care for one another.

God of the past, God of the present, God of tomorrow, help us to live in relationships that seek justice, love kindness, and ground ourselves in your love for us.

And we continue in prayer together, sharing the prayer Jesus taught the disciples:
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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Blessing and Commissioning

God names us all beloved children.

As we live within our own families and as we walk in the world

May we know God's love:

May it guide us, sustain us, and empower us to love.