

Worship at home

Mooretown Presbyterian Churches
May 21, 2023
(<https://pccweb.ca/moorepc/>, 519-813-9646)



God calls us to worship:

Call to worship: Psalm 93:1-2
James 4:8, 10
Psalm 95:6-7

We respond in praise and confession:

Prayer of praise and supplication:

God of Majesty and Mystery,
we praise you as Lord of all,
maker of the deepest dimensions and delicate details of all that is.
You live beyond time and hold all our days in your hands.
You still come to us in Jesus as Lord of Mercy,
to walk with us wherever we are in the world.
You claim us as beloved children,
blessed by the Spirit in his name.
Receive our prayers and praise this day,
and inspire us to live as witnesses to your grace and goodness
here and everywhere, now and always.

*Hymn: #265 "Hail the day that sees Christ rise"

Prayer of confession (*unison*):

Merciful God,
as we gather to celebrate your gift of love
we recall the times when we forget you
and are divided one from the other.
We acknowledge that relationships
among indigenous and non-indigenous peoples need repair.
We confess our reluctance to reach out to those
with a different story to tell.
Awaken within us the desire for reconciliation.

**We recall how often we have refused to believe
that you have forgiven sin
and that you promise resurrection
foreshadowed by Christ's own.
How often we have failed to believe
that you are God.
How often we refuse to trust
your ongoing promise, presence, and guidance.
Forgive us, merciful God.
Mend what is broken.
Heal what is wounded.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in us a willing spirit.
Amen.**

God speaks to us:

We hear the gospel of God's grace: 2nd Corinthians 5:17-21
(The response to: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good" is, "**His love endures forever.**")

*Hymn: #269 "Your kingdom come, O God"

Scripture: Acts 1:1-26
(The response to: "This is the word of the Lord" is, "**Thanks be to God**")

Casting Lots

This past Thursday, May 18th, was the fortieth day since Easter Sunday. This is the day known in the Christian Church as “Ascension Day.” On it, we remember, celebrate, and give thanks for the event known as Jesus’ Ascension. It is hard for us to imagine what exactly transpired on that day 2,000+ years ago. When the authors of scripture described the event, they described Jesus levitating from the earth and disappearing into the clouds. Whether that is what actually happened, or a way to employ the limited human language to describe the inexplicable, is not the point. The point is, that for 40 days after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he spent time with his chosen apostles proving that he was physically resurrected from the dead and teaching them about the present and coming kingdom of God. Then, on the 40th day, he left them.

As far as imagining what physically transpired that day, we’re left with the testimonies of those who were there.

The significance of Jesus’ ascension, however, is that he is no longer physically with us. Although he continues his ministry of reversing the effects of sin and bringing about the complete redemption of the Father’s beloved creation, he is not with us as he was with the apostles and the first disciples.

Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, praying with and for, and enabling his church from the throne room of heaven and earth.

The day is called Ascension Day, because he *ascended* into heaven.

I often think the name is misleading. It suggests that heaven is a place above the clouds. Heaven is not. Heaven is real, yet it is beyond our capabilities to imagine. Heaven is God’s throne room. It is not the place we go when we die. It is the place from which Jesus came when he was born among us and from which he will come again at the final resurrection feast when God’s throne room is joined to God’s footstool and His home is forever and unchallenged among us mortals.

A better name for the day would be Christ’s exaltation, or his coronation.

Yes, he has ascended. But he has ascended the steps to his throne as Lord of the Church and King of Creation.

The Book of Acts describes the beginning of the Christian movement that came to be known as the Church. This is a movement of individuals who came to

believe that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, was resurrected, and is the Son of the Living God, the Lord, the Messiah, and the Saviour of humanity.

As the people came to believe this with the entirety of their hearts, minds, and bodies, they began to learn to respond to a force within them that was not easy to describe, yet was powerful. And energizing. And productive. This force is the life-force of God Himself. We call it the Holy Spirit.

As the people learned to respond to the Holy Spirit within them, they saw that Jesus, although he was absent, was nevertheless powerfully present as He continued his ministry through the actions of his followers. Those who were sick were healed. The disturbed were given peace. The hungry fed. Those who had needs, had their needs met.

The passage we just read describes the Ascension of Jesus and some of the ways the apostles learned to listen for and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Even though they could no longer ask him directly, they continued to follow Jesus' guidance.

The author, who we assume is Luke – the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke – described the apostles together with some of Jesus' brothers, his mother, and a group of unnamed women spending time together in prayer.

At some point in the 10 days following Jesus' ascension, Peter brought to the group of apostles a problem that had to be rectified.

There were only 11 apostles.

Remember, Jesus had very intentionally called 12 men to be his apostles. To be his close companions who would then become the heads of 12 "tribes" of Christ-followers which would grow into the church. The number is important because Jesus, and those who take his name as "Christian" stand in continuity with his Israelite ancestors and the promises of all the Old Testament covenants. Just as there were 12 tribes of Israel – 12 tribes in God's original Holy Family – so too there would be 12 tribes of the Christian branch of God's Holy Family. The Book of Revelation describes a scene in the heavenly throne room in which 24 elders bow before Christ on his throne – 12 of Israel and 12 of the Christian church.

However, Judas had, for 30 pieces of silver, betrayed Jesus and turned him over to the soldiers to be arrested and crucified.

Judas was excommunicated from the company of apostles and, as Peter recalled, took his own life because of his guilt and shame.

Which meant there were now only 11 apostles.

They needed one more.

The problem was, that when the apostles were first chosen, Jesus hand-picked them. And now, Jesus is not there.

How do they choose who the Lord Jesus the Christ has chosen as the 12th apostle?

Whenever Christian congregations elect elders today, we face the same problem. We want elders that Christ wants. But how do we know?

To solve this problem, we've devised a system of discernment by which we consider individual's piety, commitment to learning the Scriptures, commitment to learning Jesus, commitment to the church organization, and other factors and then we take a vote and hope we get it right.

I've sometimes wondered if our system of decision-making is a way of taking charge of the situation; of removing the decision-making from God and giving ourselves control over the answer. After all, our decisions are based on *our* reasoning.

Sure, we pray during the whole operation. And we trust that by our prayers we would be responsive to the Holy Spirit's promptings in our minds and hearts when considering the options. But when we consider the description of the apostles' decision-making process, we can't help but notice the simplicity of the process, and the faith on which it is built.

These men and women trusted wholeheartedly that God is real, that He is good, and that despite the fact they couldn't see him, they trusted that He was nevertheless involved in their daily activities.

These men and women trusted wholeheartedly that Jesus, in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, was still involved in the every-day decisions and actions of his disciples and his church.

Their decision making was not a natural process.

It was a *supernatural* process.

It was a faith process.

Having proposed two men to take the role of the 12th apostle, they prayed. In their prayer they acknowledged that the Lord Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit knows what is best for His church. Then they cast lots.

There are varieties of ways to cast lots described in Scripture. Two ways in particular are suggested. One is that you have a relatively flat object with different markings on each side. You flip it in the air and let it land on your lap. Whichever side lands up is the answer. The other way is to have two stones or pieces of wood or bones that are similar size and shape but with different markings. In this case you either blindly draw one of those objects out of a bag, or you roll them towards a common target. Whichever object you draw, or whichever is closest to the target is the answer. Although this probably sounds a lot like the “flipping-a-coin” technique, it is not an exercise in chance. The idea behind it, is that you trust that God will direct the objects to reveal the answer He needs us to follow.

*The lot is cast into the lap,
but the decision is the Lord's alone.¹*

Underlying the practice of making these big decisions by what seems like a game of chance is the belief that God is still intimately involved in human affairs and in the direction of His Holy Community and that He will show which decision is in line with his.

The apostles cast their lots; the lot fell on Matthias. And without further discussion or debate, he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

*Casting the lot puts an end to disputes
and decides between powerful contenders.²*

They fully trusted that just as Jesus had handpicked the original 12, although He was absent, he had still chosen the replacement, Matthias.

In the present age, between his resurrection and his coming again, Jesus is not physically present with us. He resides in His rightful throne room in the heavenly realms. Nevertheless, just as a king is no less powerful in all His domain whether he is present there or not, Jesus continues to exercise his grace-filled mercy/influence even in his physical absence. This is the mysterious ministry of the Holy Spirit dwelling within each and every believer. His guidance, His wisdom, His healing

¹ Proverbs 16:33

² Proverbs 18:18

abilities are available to us now as powerfully as they were to those first 12 apostles.
That is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Are you willing to trust that promise?

We respond by affirming our faith, offering our tithes, and prayer:

*The Apostles' Creed

*Offering:

(Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while the congregation sings:)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
praise him all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

*Prayer of dedication

Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, the Lord's Prayer:

God of the generations in time and eternity,
we turn to you in these quiet moments
to offer you our thanks and our hopes for our lives.
This morning we give you thanks for all those people
who have shown us your face and taught us to follow you
through the loving example of their living faith.
We are grateful for their wisdom and courage which continue to inspire us.
Thank you for our life together in your church and the saints we've known
here.
May the light of Christ shine through our lives, too,
so that we offer light for the world you love as witnesses to your purposes.

Christ of Compassion in action
in you, we receive our call to live with purpose.
From you, we learn how to love those around us.
With you, we find strength to face each new day.
So today we offer our prayers for those facing challenges these days
and seek your guidance to respond to their cries.

We pray for those brought to mind by news headlines this week
for situations of violence and deprivation, danger and devastation.....

Keep a brief silence.

We pray for families going through difficult times,
for all who are sick or in sorrow, for all who are lonely or despairing...

Keep a brief silence.

We pray for those agonizing over important decisions and responsibilities,
for those in leadership roles and for those who care for the most vulnerable...

Keep a brief silence.

Spirit of healing and hope,
This Sunday, we pray for the work of healing and reconciliation in Canada,
between indigenous people and those who have settled in this land.
Heal lives limited by misunderstanding,
and bring hope for just resolutions to problems of long-standing.
Embrace those indigenous families who have lost someone in years past
and honour their tears in gentleness.
Increase in us all the spring of generosity we need
to create communities of dignity and mutual respect

wherever we live on this land we call home.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, move with us into the week ahead,
Remind us each day to live according to your will and purpose in all our
relationships
for we want to bear witness to the love we met in Jesus who taught us to pray
together:

The Lord's Prayer

*Hymn: #275 "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun"

God sends us to serve and witness with God's blessing:

Benediction

Congregational Amen