

ORDER OF SERVICE FOR SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2020
EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Due to copywrite limitations, we are unable to print the words to the songs. However, our musicians have chosen music to fit the scriptures. We invite you to look up the words in your worship book and ponder them. If you do not have a worship book, ponder the words to one of your favourite hymns and listen for God's voice. Those who have internet may find the songs on YouTube.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK:

Wisdom tends to grow in proportion to one's awareness of one's ignorance.

~Anthony De Mello, S. J.

BEFORE WE WORSHIP, WE REFLECT...

Seldom do revelations about God come to us all at once in one dramatic experience. Most often it is in the midst of everyday living that we catch glimpses of truth and snatches of the reality of God's realm in our midst.

The parables are like puzzle pieces that give us glimpses of how to live in God's way. We spend our lives adding pieces to the on-going puzzle and each piece we find is like a pearl of great value and a treasure found in a field we've been striving to cultivate. The puzzle is never complete but as Paul notes in Romans, "in all things God works for good with those who love and follow God's way."

As Solomon prays for wisdom, we seek to more deeply know the treasures of faith. In today's gospel Jesus offers everyday images that reveal to us the reign of God: a tree that becomes a sheltering home, yeast that penetrates and expands, a treasured pearl, a net that gains a great catch. Even as we seek the riches of God's reign, the great surprise is that God's grace finds us first!

CALL TO WORSHIP

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?

No!

Can trouble?

No!

Can suffering?

No!

What about hard times?

No!

How about hunger?

No!

What if we don't have the right clothes to wear?

No!

Danger?

No!

Not even death?

No!

Angels or spirits?

No!

How about whatever happened yesterday?

No!

How about things that could happen tomorrow?

No!

Nothing?

No!

Indeed: nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus!

Thanks be to God!

CHILDREN'S SONG: VU p. 835 Praise To The Lord

CENTERING PRAYER

Holy One, plant little mustard seeds of faith in us today, and help them grow so that we too can do amazing things. Amen.

A NEW CREED

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

CHILDREN'S TIME

You may need your parents' help with this:

Get a tall, clear glass. Put two heaping teaspoons of baking soda in the glass. Now, pour a small amount of vinegar into the glass – and stand back! Wow, does the baking soda explode or what?! Jesus tells the crowd that God's world is like leaven, or yeast, that a baker puts into bread dough to make it rise. If we did that with bread dough, it would take far too long to rise, so I am demonstrating how fast God's love can explode in a world that needs to know it's loved!! Love changes people. Love is so easy to share and you can almost see it explode like the baking soda! People love to be loved! As people of God, we love to share God's love. It is a win-win situation! Give love, get love, God surrounds us with love. Awesome!

MISSION AND SERVICE WIDENING THE WELCOME

The United Church of Christ USA is a full communion partner of The United Church of Canada. Every few years, it organizes a national conference called Widening the Welcome (WtW) jointly hosted by its Disabilities Ministries and Mental Health Network. The conference is one way for the church to become more accessible. The event is packed with speakers, worship, workshops, and networking opportunities.

For the WtW conference in November 2018, The United Church of Canada sent a small delegation of people with disabilities, and their allies. They were all committed to the United Church's desire to become a more open, accessible, and barrier-free church where people with disabilities can fully participate in all areas of the church's life.

The United Church of Canada offered financial support for people to attend the conference, which was possible through Mission & Service. Some delegates would not have been able to attend without this support.

The delegates found the conference an amazing learning experience and came back from it transformed and even more passionate about disability ministries. One of them said, "I came back with strong enthusiasm to share this knowledge with my church and promote accessibility in The United Church of Canada." Moved by the conference, other delegates have created and led worship and offered educational sessions in their own ministry contexts. Through Mission & Service, people of The United Church of Canada have been inspired to make the church even more open, accessible, and barrier-free for all!

If Mission & Service giving is already a regular part of your life, thank you so much! If you have not given, please join me in making Mission & Service giving a regular part of your life of faith. Loving our neighbour is at the heart of our Mission & Service.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

READINGS AND PSALM

First Reading: 1 Kings 3:5-12

Because Solomon did not ask for long life, riches, or the defeat of his enemies, God gave him what he asked for: wisdom to govern the people well.

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you."

Psalm 119:129-136

R: When your word is opened, it gives light and understanding. (Ps. 119:130)

¹²⁹Your decrees are wonderful; therefore I obey them with all my heart.

¹³⁰**When your word is opened it gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.**

¹³¹I open my mouth and pant because I long for your commandments.

¹³²**Turn to me and be gracious to me, as you always do to those who love your name. R**

¹³³Order my footsteps in your word; let no iniquity have dominion over me.

¹³⁴**Rescue me from those who oppress me, and I will keep your commandments.**

¹³⁵Let your face shine upon your servant and teach me your statutes.

¹³⁶**My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your teaching. R**

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-39

These words celebrate the depth of God's actions for us. Through Christ's death for us and the activity of the Spirit praying for us, we are fused to God's love poured out in Jesus Christ. Nothing, not even death itself, is able to separate us from such incredible divine love.

²⁶The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his disciples proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near!" Here, Jesus offers several brief parables that explore the implications of this announcement for people's lives.

³¹[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

³³He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

⁴⁴"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵²And he said to them, "Therefore every

scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

SERMON:

Bishop Michael Pryse,
Eastern Synod
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

During the brief few years of his public ministry, one thing Jesus never tired of describing was the kingdom of heaven; the reign of God. And Jesus’ descriptions of the kingdom often came as contradiction to what his listeners expect or want to hear. They sought a new reign –a new kingdom -that would come to God’s people in a big way; powerfully, decisively and quite deservedly! But, instead, Jesus persists in describing the kingdom using common imagery from everyday life, as a reality that comes slowly, unexpectedly and “most undeservedly!” It’s all about grace and the parables included in today’s Gospel lesson are pictures that describe a kingdom of grace; a reign of grace. The tiny mustard seed grows into a tree that becomes a nesting place for the birds of the air! The birds didn’t and couldn’t do anything to make it happen. The seed –the kingdom –grew of its own volition and nature! It’s pure grace! Likewise the yeast –“the kingdom” –is mixed by a baker – “God” –into three measures of flour –“the world.” Keep in mind that those three biblical measures are the equivalent of a bushel basket; 128 cups or 16 five-pound bags of flour! Furthermore, when the baker adds the 42 or so cups of water needed to make it come together, you are talking about 100 pounds of dough throughout which she needs to disburse the yeast! (This woman must’ve had forearms like Popeye!) But she does it. God kneads that dough until the yeast -the kingdom -is disbursed throughout the dough; until its everywhere! That’s the only way dough can become bread. The yeast breathes life into the loaf. It is a gift of grace.

Jesus then goes on to liken the kingdom to a great treasure that someone “found.” He didn’t earn it or make it. He “found it.” It’s a straight-up gift! And the finder considers it to be so valuable that he sells all his possessions in order to keep it. Likewise, with a pearl merchant who “finds” one pearl of great value, perfect in size, composition and colour. It’s a once in a lifetime find. It’s grace; an amazing, wondrous and unexpected grace. Again, it is worth everything that he has! Jesus concludes his kingdom riff by describing the kingdom as being like a net, the kind you drag through the sea. It catches fish of all kinds, seeming without any discrimination until the net is full. Good fish, bad fish; it makes no difference. They are all are caught up in the kingdom. It’s a picture of God’s grace; about the amazing breadth and capacity of the reign of God! And it is only then, after laying out these five parable pictures of this grace-steeped, grace-infused kingdom that Jesus finally turns to the question of what will happen in eternity, at the end of the age, when after the great resurrection, there is a time of judgement. And let’s be honest, that’s the place where most of us would prefer to begin the discussion of the kingdom! “Enough with these cryptic fables!”

Finally we get the kind of “gun barrel justice” we would expect from any king worthy to wear a crown! But don’t be so quick! Context always matters and we need to read these words recognizing that the rhetorical weight of Jesus’ whole discourse has to do with the graciousness and universal breadth of the reign of God. The kingdom is a free and undeserved gift that you can’t earn, create or manufacture. Therefore, inasmuch as God will one day provide judgement, we can assume and trust that this is a judge whose nature it is to acquit everyone, to free everyone. The Scriptures do of course tell us that, sadly, there are some who will reject this kingdom and the reconciliation that God gifts to us through it. The outcome of that choice is a self-judgement. Who could imagine a worse hell?

Episcopal theologian and author, Robert Farrar Capon, describes it this way; *“the very hell of hell lies precisely in the fact that its inhabitants will be insisting on a perpetual rejection of an equally*

perpetual gift. It will be an eternal struggle to escape from the gift of a love that will never let them go." Can you imagine a darker hell than that? It has been said, and wisely so, that it is only by being little that we can ever discover anything that is big. To a small child everything seems big. Mom and Dad are like giants. You go to school for the first time and the place is huge! It's only when you grow up that you come to see that mom and dad weren't so big after all and that the vast school only had eight classrooms.

When you are little, everything seems big. Likewise, in matters of faith, it's only by being little that you can really imagine and experience those things that are big. I think this is also a key point of the gospel. The kingdom that Jesus describes is always recognized from a perspective of smallness and humility; a perspective where the first become last and the last become first. And maybe the only way for us to start recognizing the reign that Jesus points toward, the only way for us to more fully experience God's reign of grace; the kingdom of heaven; is by taking the risk and making ourselves just a little bit smaller.

About 30 years ago Canadian author, Douglas Coupland, burst onto the literary scene with a novel whose title coined the now familiar term Generation X. In his follow-up short story collection entitled Life After God, Coupland describes the Gen-Xers as perhaps the first generation to experience a life without God. It reads as a lament for a generation that feels very much adrift but also carries prominent grace notes of hope! Near the end of the book he tells a friend about an experience he had in Stanley Park in Vancouver "Did I ever tell you," I said, "about the time last year in Stanley Park when Mark and I went rollerblading?" "No." "There was this group of blind people, with white canes and everything; a CNIB tour or something. They heard us coming and they motioned for us to stop and we did. Then they handed Mark a camera and asked him to take their picture." "Blind people?" "Exactly. But the strange thing was, they still believed in sight. In pictures." On the last page of the book Coupland shares a secret with us. He writes, "Now here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray you are in a quiet room as you read these words. My secret is that I need God; that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind because I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

Although he might use different words to describe it, Coupland has taken the first and most important step toward discovering the kingdom, a state of being of experience that proceeds, not from bigness and power, but from smallness and humility; a state that is found in recognizing our complete neediness and dependence upon the grace and love of the one who is the author and source of all of existence.

I believe that our world and its inhabitants have a deep desire to experience that kingdom today. Many of us know the emptiness and hollowness of the false gospels upon which dominate much of life today. The hunger for a new way of living is evident all around us. As blind as our world sometimes seems, as blind as we often are, I think that most of us still believe in pictures; in the possibility of a better way, a renewed world; a new kingdom. This time of living through a pandemic has amplified the pangs of that hunger. It has prodded and inspired acts of kindness and generosity; a renewed care for and love for creation and community. The righteous appeals of anti-racism protesters around the world have pulled at our hearts and pricked our consciences. We long for something better. We hunger for and long to see and experience that life which is life indeed; life in its intended justness, fullness and abundance; life in the kingdom! Today we are given an opportunity to renew our residency in that special kingdom whose embrace has come to us as a gift that is predicated fully and completely upon God's grace; not upon what we have or don't have; not on what we've done or not done. The kingdom is already within us and around us! God's already given it! All we need to do is live it! AMEN.

HYMN OF THE MONTH: More Voices #138 My Love Colours Outside The Lines

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

In the unbreakable bond of God's love, we pray:

For our world, torn by strife,

May your love soften hard hearts.

For planet earth, damaged by exploitation and contamination,

May your love soften hard hearts.

For our government, shaped by conflict,

May your love soften hard hearts.

For those who blame and bully others,

May your love soften hard hearts.

For the harsh words and actions we have expressed to others,

May your love soften hard hearts.

For those who are struggling, in pain, dying, doubting their faith, afraid. For Myrtle & Art Ganske; Mike Froese; Brooke Alexiuk; Abbie; Tracy Skoglund; Carolyn & Douglas; Amber; Nicole; Gordon Dreger; Diane Dreger; Debbie & Dwayne; Elizabeth & David. Soften all hearts this day, O God, with your love. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION:

May God walk before you to guide you on your way.

May God walk behind you to protect you from all harm and danger.

May God walk beside you as your constant companion and friend.

May God dwell within you to be your joy and your peace. Amen.

SENDING SONG: MV #79 Spirit, Open My Heart

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