

St. Mark's United Church
45 Walford Rd, Sudbury, ON, P3E 2H2
15th August 2021 – Season of Pentecost

THE GATHERING

PRELUDE

WORDS OF WELCOME/ANNOUNCEMENTS

LIGHTING OF OUR CHRIST CANDLE

God has given us new life in Christ, the light of the world! We light this candle as a symbol of God's constant presence and never-failing love.

CALL TO WORSHIP (responsive)

One: Give thanks to God with all your heart.

All: We give thanks as we worship together.

One: Appreciate God's marvelous creation and God's gracious deeds.

All: We pause where we are, to praise God, whose splendour is everywhere displayed.

One: God has claimed us as a faithful people; and empowers us to share God's goodness to enrich the lives of all people.

All: We worship God together, whose praise endures forever!

Opening Prayer: (unison)

Gracious God, as we enter your house of prayer we are still longing to be together in one physical space. We are longing for communities restored, and the social gatherings which bring much joy. But we trust your word, that wherever two or more are gathered, you are present among us. Bless us as we gather in Spirit this holy day to seek your wisdom and guidance for all our days. Amen.

HYMN # 242 VU "Let All Things Now Living"

Let all things now living a song of thanks-giving to God our Creator triumphantly raise; who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us, by guiding us on to the end of our days.

God's banners are o'er us, pure light goes before us, a pillar of fire shining forth in the night; till shadows have vanished and darkness is banished, to God in the highest, hosanna and praise.

By law God enforces, the stars in their courses and sun in its orbit obediently shine; the hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains, the depths of the ocean proclaim God divine.

We, too, should be voicing our love and rejoicing with glad adoration a song let us raise: till all things now living unite in thanksgiving, to God in the highest, hosanna and praise.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (unison)

Merciful God, we confess our sin and acknowledge that we are also implicated in the sins of our ancestors. We have taken so many privileges and gifts for granted, as our right, and yet have denied the same to others. Forgive us for all the ways, small and great, that we have failed to live into your covenant. We have a long and difficult journey ahead of us as we labour for justice and peace. Walk with us and, by your Spirit, enable us to bring hope and joy to people everywhere. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Leader: God is ever faithful, a help to those who seek to walk in God's ways.

People: We are God's forgiven people. Today is a new day!

WORD

FIRST READING: 1 Kings 2: 10-12; 3: 3-14

GOSPEL: John 6: 51 - 58

HYMN: # 649 VU "Walk with Me"

R. Walk with me, I will walk with you and build the land that God has planned where love shines through.

When Moses heard the call of God he said, "Lord, don't send me." But God told Moses, "You're the one to set my people free." R

Now Peter was a most unlikely man to lead the flock, but Jesus knew his holiness and he became the Rock. R

Young Mary Magdalene was sure her life could be much more, and by her faith she dared to let God's love unlock the door. R

And when you share your faith with me and work for life made new, the witness of your faithfulness calls me to walk with you. R

MESSAGE: "Follow the Leader"

I'm re-retired, and over the years of ministry training I've taken more than a few courses on leadership. I've never really thought of myself as a leader. That's a role for other people. People on the world stage – presidents and prime ministers, heads of corporations and organizations. It's the role of trail-blazers and game changers, people like civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. or anti-colonial nationalist Mahatma Gandhi, or environmental activist Autumn Peltier, the young woman from Wikwemikong who is the chief water protector for the Anishnabek Nation.

We're introduced to the concept of leadership early in life. Come back with me a few years and remember this game. The person at the head of the line goes through various actions, skipping, turning circles, summersaults, crab walks, hopping on one foot, thinking up various moves; and each person in the line behind must imitate those actions or lose their place in the game. A leader is someone who gets to go first and has ideas we are expected/invited to follow. As a person somewhere in the line, maybe you couldn't wait until it was your turn. Then you could demonstrate your own creativity as the leader.

Various disciplines have come up with the concept of leadership styles, (much as you might have a personality type.) One model I referred to suggested eight styles. Another, a health care model proposed four: transactional, transformational, servant, and charismatic. It's not that you would use only one style, but that you might operate mainly from that perspective, depending on your preferred way, or as required by the context. In the stories of our ancestors in the faith the people are the followers. And their leaders are legendary: like Moses; the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and prophets Elijah and Elisha. These leaders, with their close connection to the Lord, shaped a people's identity. To their surrounding neighbours these people and leaders were unique, a people who claimed "The Lord" as their true leader. Their God.

But the people wanted a king like other nations had, and God reluctantly agreed to a monarchy. It was a continuing saga of battles and infidelities, of human failures, and of people not following in the ways of God. Monarchy seemed to serve the people no better than any other style of leadership. And yet, Solomon's prayer, coming out of his encounter with the Lord in a dream, impressed me with his desire for wisdom. "I'm just young and have no experience," he says. I sympathized. He had big shoes to fill, and already he had been taking steps to secure the kingdom, eliminating his father's adversaries and settling scores. Who wouldn't feel secure with a leader who demonstrates military strength and governs with a strong will. Solomon wants to follow in his father's footsteps and lead by David's example; and he goes forward as the chosen son (he was not the first in line) with David's instruction and blessing. The covenant bond with God's people continues to define a nation whose legendary leaders are held in high esteem. We all want and need leaders to guide us well.

Throughout these seemingly endless months of the Covid 19 pandemic good leadership has been paramount. We have taken note of how other countries have managed; and asked what we could learn from each other. What will we begin to do differently knowing the vast inequities in people's experience of these difficult times? We've also witnessed a less-than-peaceful transition of power in the United States; and heard the voices of so many telling us that it is time to put past wrongs to right: Black lives matter demonstrations, the Truth and Reconciliation Report's calls to action, the anti-hate protestors naming our collective sins. We need good, strong and faithful leaders in every place.

I believe that leadership on the small stage is the focus of Jesus' ministry, his mission the empowerment of people in their family and community lives. It means that I am a leader, and you are a leader. What we do on a small scale changes/transforms the world.

Perhaps you have a memory of that one teacher or leader who made a significant difference in your life, and set you on the path of becoming who you are today. I recall a conversation with a woman from a congregation I once served. It was around Father's Day and she was remembering how much her father loved teaching. His

favourite part was when his students didn't understand. "That's when it would get interesting," he would say. And her father would be eager to try some new approach.

Jesus, our teacher, is known for his use of parables throughout the gospels, and the Gospel of John frames some lessons in metaphors, the "I am" sayings. I sympathize with the disciples, who couldn't seem to grasp it when Jesus was teaching about himself and his mission. Jesus talks about himself as food for his disciples. This message has strong Eucharistic overtones, and I know John's gospel has layers of meaning to sift through for those who have ears to hear; but if taken literally, this image has a bit of an ick factor, at least to me. What if we imagine Jesus feeding us in the same way our mothers did, at first in the womb, and then nurtured at the breast after birth – would it be too much of a stretch to think Jesus might have taught that way in order that we might understand? Jesus has come bind up the wounds, to comfort the broken-hearted, to create a community of caring, passionate, justice-seeking, peacemakers – where his followers wash one another's feet, and love one another as he has loved us. His followers will carry the light for each other. As one author put it, "We are basically here to walk each other home."

We are the incarnation of what was spoken by the prophet Joel, and recognized by Peter in his sermon. The young and old, the servant and free, the sons and daughters - people of all gender identities, the Jew and Gentile, the indigenous and racialized. We are not simply imitating Christ, copying his moves, as we would if playing 'follow the leader'. The church, the community of Christ's followers, has been birthed through the coming of Jesus Spirit to dwell among us and within us. We are far from perfect, but I believe we are ready. We are more attuned to a diversity of voices than we once were. We are more aware of our faults and failures, our places of privilege. Perhaps we can pray, as did Solomon, for wisdom, because we are young, inexperienced, and don't know how to go out and come in.

As some of you will know, last summer I took up kayaking. I never go out alone, but have a partner or a group to journey with. We take turns leading and exploring and suggesting where to paddle. Sometimes the others have to help me out of the kayak at the end of a long outing. Really that's the hardest part, and I decided not to get

embarrassed about my limits. I was out with two sisters and a brother in law at Lake Laurentian Conservation Area recently, where the opportunities to explore nature are bountiful. We were observing some Canada geese with a long line of goslings behind them; too many to have been hatched by the same parents, I wondered? We know geese gather for migration, and travel in v formation to maximize energy savings, and take turns at the lead. They form family groupings to protect and care for their young. The hatchlings are watched over in a sort of goosy day care, a shared, co-operative leadership, not unlike those we rely on in church and community groups.

We're in uncharted territory – we're moving from leadership based on power and authority residing in one individual set apart, to leadership that comes from having a diversity of voices at the table. It is not easy to give way in order to create space where people are safe. But we will take turns being the leader, and then the follower. It will be like the childhood game – everyone will have a voice, and we will depend on one another as we find a new way, a better way – after Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

THE RESPONSE

SHARING OUR GIFTS

THE OFFERTORY SONG OF DEDICATION: (VU 538)

For the gift of creation, the gift of your love, and the gift of the Spirit by which we live, we thank you and give you the fruit of our hands. May your grace be proclaimed by the gifts that we give.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

O God whose generosity knows no bounds, we offer what we have in order that your goodness will flow throughout the world. Bless us in our giving, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious God, we thank you for all that is good in our lives: for the bounty of the earth, for sunshine and rain, for families and friendships. We give thanks for your abiding Spirit which has sustained us, and the many different communities of faith, throughout these challenging times. We thank you for the vision of a world made whole and new,

which you set before us as a guide for our path. We thank you for the persistence of all those who have gone before us, calling us to action, leading us in a good way.

We pray for our leaders, giving thanks for those who have made the world a better place by their shining example of love, and for their determination to stay the course in spite of the odds against them.

We pray for all people who serve others in their line of work, for teachers, and medical staff, for servers and sanitation workers, for politicians and community advocates. May all who need rest and recreation this season find an oasis in which to pause.

We pray for the sick, the lonely, the bereaved, the anxious, and all who need your comforting presence. We remember those who experience homelessness, and those who struggle with addiction and mental health. We remember households where bread and drink are never taken for granted, because there is insufficient to sustain.

We pray for ourselves, O God, that we might have the wisdom to ask for the gifts from your heart, gifts that will help us to live fully, gifts that will benefit us and all folks we seek to serve, as we follow the leadership of the Christ. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

JOURNEYING

HYMN: # 642 VU "Be Thou My Vision"

Be thou my vision, O joy of my heart;
naught be all else to me save that thou art,
thou my best thought,
by day or by night, waking or sleeping
thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, my calm in all strife;
I ever with thee, and thou in my life;
thou loving parent,
thy child may I be, thou in me dwelling,
and I one with thee.

Be thou my battle shield, sword for the fight;
be thou by dignity, thou my delight,
thou my soul's shelter,
thou my high tower;
raise thou me heaven-ward,
O power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always;
thou and thou only,
the first in my heart,
great God of heaven,
my treasure thou art.

Great God of heaven, after victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys,
O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart,
whatever befall, still be my vision,
O ruler of all.

COMMISSIONING AND BENEDICTION:

Go joyfully today, with respect for the limits that life imposes; and with deep gratitude for the gifts and privileges that are yours. Above all, go in hope.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.

CHORAL BENEDICTION: #419 VU "May the Grace of Christ" (tune Stuttgart VU 540)

May the grace of Christ our Saviour, and our Maker's boundless love,
with the Holy Spirit's favour, rest upon us from above.

POSTLUDE