

St. Mark's United Church
45 Walford Rd, Sudbury, ON, P3E 2H2
8th 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: As we worship, each in our own sacred spaces, we remember that we are one in Christ.

All: We are grateful for the technology which enables us to worship together.

One: We gather today to give thanks for this good creation of which we are a part.

All: We are here to praise God, and to seek God's guidance for our living.

One: God has gathered us into a community of care and worship; and commissioned us to bring good news to the world.

All: We will worship together, in joy and thanksgiving.

OPENING PRAYER: (unison)

Generous God, we open space in our lives that you might break bread with us, who are hungry in so many ways. We come as people who are at times - lost, lonely, discouraged, and beaten down by the cares of the world. Bring us into your presence with a fresh word of hope to lift our weary spirits. Nurture us with your love, that we may share your grace with others, for you, indeed, are bread for our journey together.
Amen.

HYMN # 389 VU "God Is Here"

God is here! As we your people meet to offer praise and prayer, may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share. Here as in the world around us, all our varied skills and arts wait the coming of the Spirit into opened minds and hearts.

Here are symbols to remind us of our life-long need of grace; here are table, font, and pulpit; here the cross has central place. Here in honesty of preaching, here in silence, as in speech, here, in newness and renewal, God the Spirit comes to each.

Here our children find a welcome in the Shepherd's flock and fold; here as bread and wine are taken, Christ sustains us, as of old. Here the servants of the Servant seek in worship to explore what it means to daily living to believe and to adore.

God of all, of church and kingdom, in an age of change and doubt keep us faithful to the gospel, help us work your purpose out. Here, in this day's dedication, all we have to give, receive; we, who cannot live without you, we adore you! We believe!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (unison)

Merciful God, we promise to follow Jesus, who sat at the table with outcasts and sinners. Yet we confess that too often our words and actions are not consistent with our beliefs. Often we ignore the needy, show indifference to the lonely, and reject those who seem different from us. Forgive us, we pray. Empower us to reach out in love and acceptance. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Leader: God the Creator brings you new life, forgives and redeems you.

People: We are God's forgiven people, free to live our lives in the spirit of Jesus.

WORD

FIRST READING: 1 Kings 19: 4 - 8

GOSPEL: John 6: 35, 41 - 51

HYMN: # 595 VU "We Are Pilgrims"

We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

Sister, let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear; I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh I'll laugh with you; I will share your joy and sorrow, till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven, we shall find such harmony, born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

MESSAGE: "Tend and Befriend"

A few days ago I was standing at the kitchen sink, peeling the last few withered potatoes I had on hand, to add to a pot of hash. I was tired of cooking, tired of trying to

figure out what to make, tired of food in general. For sure I was suffering the malaise of the well-off. I remembered my Dad, and could almost hear his voice scolding me. Whenever we'd turn up our noses at something Mom served that was not to our liking he would say: "You're too well fed". It was "eat it or do without" in our household. My parents grew up during the Depression and knew first-hand about not having enough. There was always food on the table, but rarely any variety.

Lack of food can be the consequence of an ecological disaster, like when crops fail from drought or disease. Food insecurity also happens because countries are at war. Crops can't be planted in or harvested from fields polluted with land mines. And when government policies favour the privileged and do not take the needs of all people into account - the most vulnerable will suffer indiscriminately. In Ireland poor tenant farmers owed so much to the British government that there was not enough left over to sustain them.

When I'm watching the news, or reading about events in history, like the Potato Famine, the Great Hunger, which afflicted Ireland from 1845 to 1852, and drove many survivors to emigrate to Canada and the United States, I can never quite get my head around the hardship and suffering that they must have endured. I can know it in my thoughts, but have not experienced it in my own being. I believe that Jesus' main message to us is that he knows in his thoughts AND in his being what we are going through. And he has come into this world for us – to tend and befriend us.

In John's gospel a series of metaphors are used, that we might come to believe in Jesus. The "I am" sayings. Jesus describes himself as the light, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth, the vine, and the bread of life. His way of teaching about himself leads to great confusion and controversy. People can't quite grasp that. Just as their ancestors survived the migration from Egypt and years in the wilderness through the providence of God, Jesus comes as bread from heaven to bring life that endures. In flesh and blood and human experience Jesus enters into this world and gives of his own self. Instead of feeding off others, or exploiting misfortune for personal gain, or taking advantage of golden opportunities, or criminalizing the poor, Jesus makes sure people are fed. What he offers is freely given to all – regardless of social or political connections, whether the people have the means or no means at all. Jesus is teaching us, by his life and example, what it means to be fully human.

As I said, my Wilson family branch experienced poverty during the depression. My aunts (I've seen photographs of them in their flour sack dresses) told stories about the bread and lard sandwiches in their school lunch pails. And they considered themselves fortunate, because some children had nothing to spread on their bread. They told about the steady diet of baked beans through one winter; and then the memorable chicken

stew – made possible because the brothers had lured one of the neighbour’s chickens into the yard where it met its fate. Apparently Grandma, being an upright citizen, soundly berated them for their crime, then quickly got the chicken plucked and into the pan, before her conscience could trouble her too much. What tough times! It’s hard to imagine their need as I finish off the withered potatoes knowing I can get more with a quick trip to the local grocery store. (Though we did face some shortages early in the pandemic – toilet paper, flour, yeast)

One of the ways I’ve stayed connected with some folks while languishing at home - is through a book club. We’ve met by Zoom, of course, and I can’t wait to discuss the book I’ve just finished reading - “The Four Winds”, by Kristin Hannah. In short, it is a book of suffering, which begins for Elsa in post WW1 Texas. Treated poorly by her family, her journey eventually takes her west to California. During the years of the great depression parts of the Midwest had become a dustbowl, and once self-sufficient farms were abandoned. I couldn’t help but draw comparisons to our own times a century later, the plight of migrant workers, the consequences of climate change, the need for sustainable agriculture, the call to embrace diversity and to be accepting of our differences. The book was a tough read, but it brought to life for me the struggles of my own family and helped me consider more compassionately what others go through. It’s a new beginning in my ongoing education.

Without giving too much of the story away, (you may want to read the book), there is a particular scene that touched me deeply. After weary days of travel Elsa must set up camp by a dirty ditch, the only source of water for this makeshift community. She has made it clear to her children and herself that this is only for one night. It is crowded. The folks from a neighbouring campsite drop by to welcome her. And from their own meagre store of food a man gives her a potato. They have so little to live on, and so many mouths to feed, and work is scarce, and yet here is an unexpected show of hospitality.

How do people survive? Resourcefulness, sheer determination, courage, hope. And by helping one another along the way.

Scientists tell us that the human response to danger or crisis is “fight or flight”. But further studies have also shown that those in strong social networks might respond in another way, “tend and befriend”. Speaking from my own experience, navigating the rough roads of these past many months has been made bearable, and do-able, because of the strong connections with others. I’m sure you will agree that even our limited contact with family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and with all of the people with whom we interact on a regular basis, has kept us human, has kept us from giving up. There were times when we might have felt like Elijah sitting under the broom tree saying, “let’s just get this over with, I can’t take it anymore”. And while we were lost in

hopelessness, an angel would come, with food and tenderness, and we would be, once again, strengthened for the journey.

As we come out of the pandemic restrictions we are not the same people we were. We have learned deep respect for the great trials and struggles endured by so many. We have come to understand that we may be in the same storm, but not the same boat. Some of us have fared much better than others. We have gained new appreciation for our many privileges, and for all the little things we've taken for granted. It is my hope that the ones God sends into our lives will continue to teach us how to tend and befriend. 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 this season of sunshine and rain, growth and renewal; for the joy of sharing in worship, serving our communities together, and growing in faith; for the love which holds us steady when the way is hard; and for the gift of each day and all that it brings.

Through these summer days we continue to learn of the challenges facing so many of your people. We pray for peoples for whom justice has been denied or delayed. We pray for all who suffer exploitation, discrimination, prejudice or persecution. We pray for those who are lonely, discouraged, anxious, or angry. We pray for the hungry, and for those who are not adequately housed.

We pray for people who face financial struggles and uncertain futures. We pray for all who face health issues, who are awaiting surgery or recovering from illness. May all who hunger for a better life find your presence a comfort and a help.

We pray for our world leaders, and for all people of power and influence, that they might be guided by your Spirit of truth and love.

We pray, finally, for ourselves, that each one of us who has an earnest prayer for your intervention, O God, might know that you have heard us and are never far from us. We ask in Jesus' name.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

JOURNEYING

HYMN: # 651 VU "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand. Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow; let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through. Strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield, be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side: songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever give to thee, I will ever give to thee.

COMMISSIONING AND BENEDICTION:

Go into the world in peace, having the courage to seek justice and resist evil; having the compassion to tend and befriend those who are suffering; having the faith to carry the light of Christ that others might see their way. 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