

Sunday 18th October 2020

All material © Heather Whyte unless stated otherwise

God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Suggested hymn

Lord for the years

Watch at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkTrFQLy6js&t=48s>

Prayer

Loving God we gather together to bring you our praise and thanksgiving for all your wonderful gifts of creation and your sustaining presence with us in times of joy and sorrow.

We praise you for your unconditional love which surrounds every person and continually invites us to respond in love to you and to one another. We praise you for the forgiving nature of your love which encourages us to be more loving and to forgive others without judgement or prejudice. We praise you for the planet on which we rely for life, for its wonders and its diversity which feeds our hunger and our wonder and encourages us to be more caring.

In love, we offer you our thanks for the wonder of creation and its seasons which bring such variety into our lives; we offer you thanks for each new day with all its potential, and for those we share the days with as we talk and laugh, work and play and reach out, building new relationships. We thank you for our gathered life as church following the way of Jesus and encouraging one another in love to build the kingdom. together we share in the words Jesus taught the disciples as we say
Our Father....

Readings

Exodus 33:12-23

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Story The three sisters (based on a traditional Iroquois legend)

In a field on the plain grew sister corn, a fine plant producing fine food. In the heat of the summer she grew strong and tall, but eventually the ground became parched and sister corn's feet hurt, she grew tired and needed to take more energy from the earth to survive.

Nearby another plant grew, sister squash, and she saw what was happening to her sister corn and so she moved to sit beneath her sister and shield her feet from the heat. As she did so she also protected the ground from the sun and moisture was retained. Now sister corn was incredibly grateful but she noticed that sitting so close beneath her, sister squash was not getting any rain falling upon her and so she angled her leaves to allow the rain to drip onto her sister. In return sister squash with her spiky stems kept predators away from both.

Not far away grew sister bean, she was weak and could not support her own weight, so she gently wrapped herself around strong sister corn for support. Her roots fixed nitrogen into the soil which would feed next year's crops and together she and her sister corn were able to withstand the winds that blew across the plain.

When harvest time came each sister provided something different for the table. Sister corn brought carbohydrate whilst sister squash provided vitamins and oil, and sister bean provided protein. Together the sisters showed the world how to live together and work together mutually and provide for all.

Reflection

In our reading from Exodus we have the famous story of Moses watching God's back as he passes by.

Later in Exodus there is an implication at least that Moses does see the face of God, and his own face glows, but for now he is not able to withstand the full face of God. It got me thinking, how do we see the presence of God? Often, we talk of 'having' seen the presence of God in people's actions, or in some miracle of creation, is this the equivalent of having seen God's back, having seen where God has been? Jesus invites us into a different relationship with God as partners in creation. Partners

work together, they spend time together planning, so surely this means more of a face to face relationship. More importantly it must mean being part of where God 'will' be seen, which we could say is being the face of God in the world. I remember the story of a little girl being asked to define the church and saying it was like a pair of spectacles through which people could see God. We are the church, so it seems following Jesus means helping people to see God. Initially we might help them see where God has been present in their lives but as the journey continues we would hope to help them into an active relationship with God, in which they see the face of God rather than the back of God.

So, the question for us is, are we people of the back or the face of God? I think this is a question that Paul wrestled with as he encouraged those early churches. In his first letter to the Thessalonians he is quick to praise them, their change in actions and their love for others is causing people to take note. I wonder what Paul would write to the church today. We would all like to think that we are loving and that we show the face of God to people, but the truth is we are on a journey and sometimes we slip backwards and make mistakes. At least, I know I do. I wonder if we truly understand what Jesus meant when he said we were to love one another.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist master of mindfulness in his book 'At Home in the World', tells a story about Durian fruit. Durian fruit is a distinctive fruit popular with many in Southeast Asia. It has an extremely strong aroma which you either love or loath. If you love it, it can be difficult to understand that some people find it unpleasant. Thich Nhat Hanh tells of a day he was trying to meditate in the temple but there was a Durian fruit on the alter, a thanksgiving offering, he is in the loath camp on Durian and he could not concentrate for the smell so, he trapped the fruit under the bell he was using and thus finished his meditation. The incident led him to reflect on how he would feel if a friend offered to share their prize durian fruit with him out of love. He would not be happy; he would suffer terribly. This led him to reflect on the nature of love. The person offering the fruit wanted to make him happy but had failed to understand Thich's feelings. Is love without understanding really love, he asks? Love is another word for understanding, love needs understanding. Jesus said we were to love our neighbour but to do that we must engage with them and build a relationship so that we can understand their needs. We might call this empathy.

I recently came across a project called the Empathy Lab, which seeks to teach children about empathy using story books. As you know I use a lot of stories to explore the spiritual meaning of our faith journey, so I was intrigued to find out more. On their website (<https://www.empathylab.uk/>) as well as examples of wonderful stories I discovered an interesting exploration of empathy, in contrast to sympathy, using a cartoon to illustrate the text. You can watch it on the link below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw&feature=emb_logo What is empathy?

I think this gives us as Christians food for thought. How well do we seek to build relationships and engage with people? Are we truly sisters and brothers to those around us?

There is a wisdom story, source unknown, that tells of a poor boy from the ghetto, who is spellbound by the arrival of a man driving a big, shiny, brand new sports car through the streets of the ghetto. The car stops and the driver gets out, eyeing the boy suspiciously for his intense interest in the car. Thinking the worst, the man approaches the boy, intending to warn him off, but is very surprised to find himself being asked a question. 'How did you get such an amazing car?'

The man replies brusquely that it is none of the boy's business and not to touch the car, then adds that in fact his brother has given him the car. The boy stared at him in amazement and the man says, 'I imagine you wish you had a brother like that.'

The boy, finding his voice whispers, 'Oh no! I wish I could be a brother like that.'

The man assumed he knew what the boy was thinking, but he didn't. If he had any thoughts for the boy it was sympathy but in making his statement he is given the opportunity to discover something much deeper in the boy's persona. Love will never make assumptions, it will make relationships and in partnership will offer support, encouragement and understanding. In the story of the three sisters, they lived together so closely that each was aware of the needs of the others, and how they could help one another. We are living through strange times, and often we see the best and the worst of people as they cope with the challenges of Lockdown?

What do the ways we are responding to Lockdown and restrictions say of our love and our faith? How would Paul encourage us, and perhaps challenge us in our portrayal of the face of God. Are we, as church, helping others to find and see God?

Just some of the questions we can ask ourselves as we engage with God in the coming days. We cannot meet each other, but we can still share with one another. As church, we need to share our thoughts and perhaps plan a strategy for the mission of the church through our engagement with others. It can begin with a simple question such as 'How are you' or even 'where did you get that car', but never 'would you like some of my Durian fruit'! There have been wonderful examples of caring, as people have responded to the needs of neighbours. Let us pray that the seeds that have been sown find nurture and love can grow in our fractured communities.

Suggested hymn

A touching place

Watch at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTlwZ3XNyEY>

Prayers

Loving God we offer you our prayers for the world.

You invite us into belonging and yet all around the world are people who struggle to find their place. In your kingdom every child will find welcome and shelter in which they experience a love that nurtures and enables them to grow in their own love.

May we play our part in building your kingdom, may we practice your unconditional love.

You invite us to love with a passion built on selflessness and mindfulness and yet around the world we see the results of selfish love and passion-driven destruction. In your kingdom all will know their worth and understand the worth of others; we will be one in love.

May we play our part in building your kingdom, may we practice your unconditional love.

You invite us to care for others, as if they were a part of us, to seek justice and equal opportunity yet we see the fallout from injustice and stories of unfairness, and witness the actions of power seeking politicians. In your kingdom those given authority will always seek the greatest good for the most people and respecting each person all will find their place to give and to receive.

May we play our part in building your kingdom, may we practice your unconditional love.

You invite us to create with you, a world of love where all are valued, no one takes what is not theirs by power, violence or deceit, yet millions are abused, neglected or forgotten. In your kingdom all will have the right to choose and be guided by love in their choice.

May we play our part in building your kingdom, may we practice your unconditional love.

You invite us to journey together, learning from and with each other, sharing our experiences and building deeper and loving relationships and yet we allow barriers to be built, sometimes through words and actions, that drive us apart through fear. In your kingdom we will know that we are one and draw strength from being together allowing love to overcome all fear.

May we play our part in building your kingdom, may we practice your unconditional love.

Loving God, in our life together as church may we be a glimpse of the kingdom and a mirror of the hope of love that is built on understanding and knowing one another. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

Suggested hymn

Brother, sister let me serve you

Watch at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttW9oQ-yiuU&t=58s>

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.