



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
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Celebration of Worship
Easter 6

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

Among us the spirit of the Creative God conceives new life
And we feel the life within us.

In our history the light of the Wisdom Jesus makes gentle entry
And we see the light before us.

Into our dreams the Inspiring Spirit gently whispers
And we follow the voice that guides our way.

HYMN: "PRAISE WITH JOY THE WORLD'S CREATOR" (TIS 179)

Praise with joy the world's Creator,
God of justice, love and peace,
source and end of human knowledge,
force of greatness without cease.
Celebrate the Maker's glory,
power to rescue and release.

Praise the Son who feeds the hungry,
frees the captive, finds the lost,
heals the sick, upsets religion,
fearless both of fate and cost.
Celebrate Christ's constant presence –
Friend and Stranger, Guest and Host.

Praise the Spirit sent among us,
liberating truth from pride,
forging bonds where race or gender,
age or nation dare divide.
Celebrate the Spirit's treasure –
foolishness none dare deride.

Praise the Father, Son and Spirit,
one God in community,
calling Christians to embody
oneness and diversity.
Thus the world shall yet believe, when
shown Christ's vibrant unity.

PRAYER

Our living and loving God,
as we come to you in prayer
our first words are of praise and thanksgiving.

We thank you for the beautiful gifts
you have in love and mercy given.
For the sights and sounds, the fragrances and textures
Of everything which surrounds us;
for the changing beauty of the world,
for the wonder and splendor of a life,
we thank you God.

Most of all we thank you for Jesus;
For his life of love,
For his teaching and example,
For his death on the cross,
For the new life he has bought us,
And for all that we enjoy because of his love.

*Yet Lord, when we remember the greatness of your love,
And the command of Jesus that we should love one another,
We are ashamed of the poverty of our own love.
We confess we have not let love guide our hearts
or inspire our living.
We have been blind to the needs of others,
Deaf to their cry for help,
Slow to respond.
Forgive for our failure and sins.
Loving God,
Help us to see who we really are
And help us to see who we really can be.
May your Spirit live in us
That we may more joyfully follow Jesus.
Amen*

In Christ, there is life.
With Christ, there is freedom.
Because of Christ, there is hope.
Hear then the words of Christ to us:
'Your sins are forgiven'.
Thanks be to God.

ENCOUNTERING

BIBLE READINGS

Acts 17:22-28 & John 14:15-21

PRAYER

Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit,
that in your light we may see light,
in your truth find freedom,
and in your will discover our peace;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

MESSAGE: "NEVER ALONE"

About 20 years ago, a little book called "*The All Better Book*" was published. In it, primary school children were asked to give answers to some of the world's big problems. For example, what would they do about the depletion of the ozone layer? How would they help people stop smoking?

One problem put to them was this: "*With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely. What would you suggest?*"

There were some very creative ideas put forward.

Kalani aged 8 suggested a very practical solution: "*People should find lonely people and ask their name and address. Then ask people who aren't lonely their name and address. When you have an even amount of each, assign the lonely and not lonely people together in the newspaper.*"

Max aged 9 had quite a creative and original idea: "*Make food that talks to you when you eat it. For instance, it would say, 'How are you doing?' and 'What happened to you today?'*"

Matt aged 8 seemed to have an interesting view of marriage when he suggested, "*We could get people a pet, or a husband or a wife and take them places.*"

"With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely. What would you suggest?"

As we live through this time of the Covid-19 virus and the impact it is having, we are hearing a lot about loneliness. The so called 'social distancing' and the requirement for us to stay at home whenever possible, has meant many people are experiencing loneliness; a loneliness which can be a trigger for some mental health problems.

But in a sense, I think all that the virus restrictions have done is bring to consciousness, bring to the surface, a problem which is pervasive in our society. Loneliness has been called the most devastating sickness of our age and it's a problem that plagues more people than any other. Despite often being surrounded by people we don't feel especially connected to them and hence lonely. Even with others around we can feel as if don't matter; we can feel invisible to others.

When I was inducted into the ministry here at Seacliff, invitations to attend the event were extended to many people including the local state member of parliament. He sent an apology, but not too long after his office contacted me to set up a coffee meeting. We had a pleasant chat about all sorts of things. As the conversation was drawing to a close I asked him what the most common problem he encountered in his electorate was. Without hesitation he said, "Loneliness". He went on to elaborate on how many people he came across who felt disconnected from others.

We seem, in our society, to be experiencing an epidemic of loneliness.

Which brings us to our Gospel text today; for they are words of Jesus spoken into a situation of anticipated loss, grief and loneliness.

The section we read today comes near the beginning of what is referred to as Jesus' farewell discourse which comprises chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel. If you were to read John's Gospel straight through, you would notice with chapter 14 that there is a change of pace. Up to this point the story has been moving along at quite a steady pace. Biblical scholars tell us that up to this point John's Gospel covers about a year of Jesus' life. One year in 13 chapters. But the remaining 8 chapters cover a matter of days.

The chapters of the farewell discourse are Jesus' final instructions. They are him telling his disciples everything they need to know before he leaves them. This is the time for summing up; for highlighting what is most important.

The words that the disciples are hearing from Jesus are words to prepare them for his death, resurrection and ascension. Not surprisingly, the mood of the disciples in the Gospel at this point strikes me as one of sadness, anxiety and fear. Jesus is about to leave them and the feeling of separation anxiety is starting to manifest itself. The one for whom they given up everything is about to leave. I don't think they really understand what's about to happen to Jesus or what's going to happen to them.

I think we can empathise with them. When we are about to lose or have lost something valuable or someone close or someplace that is familiar and comfortable, we too experience those emotions of sadness, anxiety and fear.

And like us, as they face this time of uncertainty, the disciples have a lot of questions. It starts back in chapter 13 with Peter asking, "*Lord, where are you going?*" Later Thomas asks, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" Or from Judas (not Iscariot), "*Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?*" The sadness, anxiety and fear of being left without Jesus raise these and other questions.

However, Jesus doesn't answer their questions, at least not in a straight forward way. Unlike our roadmap to a Covid safe economy there is no clear cut path laid out.

Jesus doesn't really answer their questions, but what he does do is make them a promise to reassure them that everything will be okay. The promise is that they will not be left alone; he will send another Advocate to be with them forever. As he is the first Advocate (1 John 2:1) the other Advocate, the promised Spirit, will be like Jesus still being with them. To make that clear he goes on to reinforce the promise when he says that he will not leave them orphaned, that he will come to them.

Earlier in chapter 14 Jesus, in order to reassure the disciples, has told them he is going to prepare a place for them. But now the address seems to have changed for Jesus says not that he is going to prepare a place for them but that he is coming to them. And not only coming, but coming to take up residence in them and us. Just beyond the end of the Gospel reading for today Jesus tells them that, "*Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*"

As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "*Not visit. Not pass through from time to time. Not send a postcard.*" No. The Divine will take up residence in us and abide with us forever. When you think about it, "In" is such a tiny word. It doesn't seem to matter much. But here, it means everything. As heirs of the disciples we dare to believe also that the Divine lives in us. We are never alone.

We too have our sadness's, encounter our anxieties and can feel threatened by our fears. We have many questions which have and still go unanswered. Those feelings may or may not be overcome. The questions may live with us through our lives and threaten to drag us down. But the promise is that God is not out there

somewhere, but right here. With us is where God dwells making a home with us as Advocate, one who is with us and for us in all of life's uncertainties.

No matter how alone we feel, we are never really alone. We are not left orphaned, which is to say that we are part of the family of Christ, embraced eternally in the love of the Triune God.

And as Jesus promises us that we will not be orphaned, that we have a place in his family, I think it is our role to ensure that others do not feel orphaned also. No one is on the outside looking in. All are welcomed as a part of Christ's family.

There is the story of a young girl about to go to bed. The night was stormy and she was quite frightened. When her parents had put her in bed and gone through the goodnight ritual, including a prayer, they went to leave the room. Because she was scared she asked her parents to stay with her. They tried to reassure her that she needn't be frightened because God was with her. Not convinced she said, "But tonight I want a God with skin on."

And sometimes that is our role. To be the reassuring, comforting presence people need in times of loneliness.

Like the disciples receiving their final briefing from Jesus, we too will face our times of uncertainty. Such times are difficult when faced alone, but Jesus' promise is that not only is God with us, but God is within us.

We are never alone.

RESPONDING

OFFERING

Jesus, Saviour and Lord,
we thank you for strengthening us in faith
by feeding and nourishing us with your risen life.
Bless these gifts which we offer in response
to your sacrificial giving of yourself to us.
Bless each of our lives as we respond
to your challenge to follow you,
sharing your love and life with others.
Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

(Bidding prayer. In the silence pray for those on your hearts today.)

Compassionate and ever present God,
in whom we live and move and have our being,
we hold before the people and life situations
which are on our hearts today.

For those who feel alone, as though they matter to no one:

For those who are confused by life, and apprehensive about what lies ahead:

For those who are uncertain about the future, and fearful of where it may lead:

For the many who are grieving, weighed down by their loss:

For those who live with ever present illness, where relief does not come:

For those under the foot of oppression and suffering, devoid of hope that anything will change:

For those working tirelessly in the face of our current epidemic, continuing on in the face of their own exhaustion:

Lord, we commit ourselves to not only pray for these people, but we also, where possible, commit ourselves to loving action with them and for them.

Lord, hear our prayer in the name of Christ.

Amen.

HYMN: "HOLY SPIRIT, COME CONFIRM US" (TIS 413)

Holy Spirit, come confirm us
in the truth that Christ makes known;
we have faith and understanding
through your helping gifts alone.

Holy Spirit, come console us
come as advocate to plead,
loving Spirit from the Father,
grant in Christ the help we need.

Holy Spirit, come renew us,
come yourself to make us live;
holy, through your loving presence,
holy, through the gifts you give.

Holy Spirit, come possess us,
you the love of Three in One,
Holy Spirit of the Father,
Holy Spirit of the Son.

William Brian Foley. Words by permission Faber Music, London.

BLESSING

Through the encouragement of Jesus,
let the Spirit of truth be the abiding reality
in your sleeping and waking,
working and relaxing,
praying and laughing.

For in the God of Christ we live and move and have your being.

May the love of God be the strength of your mind and heart.
May the grace of Christ be the salve for your bruises and wounds.
May the friendship of the Spirit be the joy of your resilient soul.
Now and ever more. Amen!

FOR REFLECTION

- What if anything stood out to you in the readings?
- What has been your experience of loneliness?
- What would you have hope for in this time?
- Was your loneliness eased? How?
- Why do you think the disciples were anxious and distressed?

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty”
-Mother Teresa

“We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness.”
-Albert Schweitzer

“Loneliness is such an omnipotent and painful threat to many persons that they have little conception of the positive values of solitude and even, at times, are frightened at the prospect of being alone.”
-Rollo May

“At the innermost core of all loneliness is a deep and powerful yearning for union with one's lost self.”
-Brendan Behan

“What makes loneliness an anguish is not that I have no one to share my burden, but this: I have only my own burden to bear.”
-Dag Hammarskjold

“Language... has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone.”
-Paul Tillich