

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The Fifth Sunday of Easter
2 May 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: I am the vine, you are the branches, says the Lord.

P: Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Loving God, your Word speaks us into being. Your Spirit breathes life into all living things. We lift up our hearts to join the symphony of praise sounding forth from plants and animals on earth, moon and sun in the sky, and by saints and angels in heaven. Glory be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, draw near to the broken-hearted. Save us when we are crushed in spirit. Have we sinned against you in thought, word, and deed? If we have failed to love you with our whole heart, mind and strength, forgive us. If we have disdained our neighbour in their time of need, or rejected their help in our own time of need, forgive us. Show the path our lives should take. Work your will within us; and mould us into a truer image of your love.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, you sent your Son into the world that we might live through him. Graft us forever into his risen life, that we may abide there, bear the fruit of love for one another, and know the fullness of joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and Holy Spirit, be glory forevermore. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Holy Lord, let your Spirit overshadow us as we hear and receive your word, that with honest hearts we may be rooted in your truth and enlivened by your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 22: 25-31 (*God's Dominion*)

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
 May your hearts live for ever!
 All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the Lord;
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before him.
 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
 and he rules over the nations.
 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
 and I shall live for him.
 Posterity will serve him;
 future generations will be told about the Lord,
 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
 saying that he has done it.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St John 15: 1-8 (*The Vine and the Branches*)

Jesus said: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

'You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 15:5 *"I am the vine, you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing."*

Canada is a 'branch plant' economy. Mayors beg Amazon to build their next big warehouse in *their* city. "Apart from you we can do nothing!" they plead. Our big factories are branches of a big vine rooted somewhere else.

If a branch bears no fruit, the head office lops it off, or at least transplants it to another country.

Nationalists oppose this. "Shouldn't we run our own factories?" they ask. To be mature and modern is to be autonomous and free, isn't it? It's beneath our dignity to be a dependent branch fastened to a big vine, or to dance like a puppet on a string, pulled this way and that by an invisible hand.

Yet Capitalists believe that an 'invisible hand' steers our buying and selling in the marketplace, rather in the way Puritans believed in the hand of Providence governing the intimate details of their lives.

Advertising pulls the strings of our desire too. At its most sophisticated, it plays on our desire to be desirable.

Political pollsters ask us what we think. Is this so they can fashion their policies truly to serve our wishes? Or are they looking for a magic button they can push inside us, to play upon our fear and prejudice, to win our vote?

We're all pulled this way and that. We're all subordinate to forces we don't fully understand. Is our feeling of freedom just an illusion, then?

When Pilate's police handcuffed Jesus and hauled him to the Governor's Mansion, Pilate put down his martini, swivelled his high-back chair, and turned to stare at Jesus. "Who are you? Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked.

Jesus answered: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you?"

Now that's an interesting (not to say 'insolent') answer. We might interpret it this way: "Shouldn't you ask *yourself* something before you ask me anything, Pilate? Are

you your own man? You've got me handcuffed. But which of us is truly free? My life is an answer to the call and claim of God. Who tells *you* what's true? Whom do you answer to? Who's pulling your strings? Caesar? The mob outside? Do you even know? And if you don't know, then *who are you?*"

Sometimes, freedom means 'release from bondage'. Freedom means breaking the chains that bind us, the laws that handcuff our will, and the obligations that interfere with our ability to choose what *we* want to do.

Adolescents think of freedom this way. It's an escape from parental rules, and the school's rigid timetable. It's freedom from 'restraint'. There's truth here.

But there's a deeper, larger, more mature kind of freedom. Freedom is the opportunity to blossom and bear fruit. Even when he's handcuffed, Jesus exudes this larger freedom.

Our freedom is our power to express our unique nature, to love unselfishly, to serve something larger than ourselves, and, in the bargain, to bear fruit, to become who we're *called* to be.

But called by whom?

Each of us is a node on the vast web of relations stretching in every direction in time and space. We abide in this web of life; we're attached to this 'vine'. We give and receive from each other all the time. No one is absolutely autonomous. That's a myth. Apart from this 'vine', we can do nothing. We need it to be who we are.

It may constrain us. We may feel like the teenager who's bursting to break away from home and school and the "annoying people who just don't understand". Or we may feel like people whose workplace makes them feel like a square peg jammed into a round hole. Or like someone trapped in a loveless relationship.

All of this can be agony. And agony may be our soul crying out for change. The change will either be the maturing of our 'inner life', or the betterment of our 'outer lives'. Or both. Either way, if the 'pruning' is good, we'll blossom and bear fruit. It will feel like freedom.

Jesus' own life was never a whimsical freedom from attachments. Nor did he exhibit an adolescent's impulse to do just what he liked, just when he felt like it.

And yet, Jesus seemed very *independent* of the social web he lived in. He was never a branch on the Roman vine. He didn't take orders from the Temple, either. Neither Pilate nor Herod could force their will upon him. No one could.

His family thought he'd lost his reason. The hyper-religious thought he was a heretic. The State thought he was a rebellious menace.

But his radical 'independence' was, in fact, grounded in a much deeper dependence and love. "I and the Father are one," he once said. "I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me."

Jesus lived, freely, in complete dependence on the Father's love for him. This abode was no prison. He was not a cog in a massive machine in a branch plant of God's

Kingdom. His life's calling, though it cost him everything, was neither a terrible chore nor a grim duty. His complete dependence upon God nourished his life. For his life was an act of 'answering love' for the very love that had begotten him. God called him to bear fruit. He did.

Another way to put it is to say Jesus' total dependence upon God the Father gave him perfect independence in the world, and freedom to be completely himself.

We experience this same freedom when we abide in him.

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God, we praise you for the gift of your Son, for the life-giving mystery of his cross and the glory of his resurrection. We offer prayers in his name for the Church and the World.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Watch over your Church, dispersed but not divided by the pandemic. Do not let our hearts grow numb with grief, our spirits weaken with worry, or our minds be clouded with misery. We trust you. You made us to be one with you in the living body of Christ. Renew our faith when we awaken and refresh our gratitude when we lie down to sleep.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for people and places where there is tragedy or misery, illness or injustice, private or public, accidental or deliberate. We pray for all who suffer an illness for which there is no cure. Let them not fall into an abyss of despair. Shed your light in the dark corners of their lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those made irritable by the aches and pains and frustrations of their lives; for those who feel useless in helping others, and those who feel they do not deserve our care. Gracious Lord, let them then know of your love for them; help them see the wonder and beauty of your image shining forth from them, that they may be lamps of hope to us in our darkest hours of distress and fear.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We bring before you the divisions of our world. We pray for peace, for an end to warfare, hatred, and strife. Remove from the hearts of people and nations all prejudice racism, and the greed that leads to violence. By your Spirit instil in those who wield power the greater power of your peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of infinite wisdom, from you all skill and science flow, all mercy, care and love. Teach us to be fair in our economic life, just in our politics, loving in our homes, and always truthful in word and deed.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of glory, the living and the dead are alive in you. With gratitude we remember those who have died. Heal our grief. Then enliven, deepen, and complete our faith, that one day we may, with them, behold you face to face in the place Christ prepares for us...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes and chances of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**