

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

*The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
(Harvest Thanksgiving)
10 October 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: The Lord is good to all.

P: And his tender mercies are over all his works.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy Creator, in the beginning, when your Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, you called all things into being: earth and sky and sea. You made the world to be a haven for every kind of life: tree and flower, animal and insect, fish and bird. And you made us to bear your image, to enjoy and care for your creation. Our cup overflows. By that same Spirit, move through us now, and draw from us the harvest of faith, hope and love.

Confiding in your mercy, we confess our need for your pardon and peace. Are we rich in things but poor in soul? Have we spoiled your garden and soiled your image in us? Free us from greed, and envy, and fear of scarcity. Give us grace to act with justice, speak the truth, and live each day by faith in you. And if our kind must have an enemy, let it be our war-like pride.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us

Holy One, in Creation and in Christ you richly bless us with all that we need, bread from the earth and the bread of heaven, giving life to the world. Grant us one thing more: grateful hearts to sing your praise, in this world and in the world to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." 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 Lord and Creator, you have taught us that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for your truth, and nourish us today; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 126 (*A Harvest of Joy for God's rescue of Israel*)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then it was said among the nations,
 'The Lord has done great things for them.'
 The Lord has done great things for us,
 and we rejoiced.
 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
 like the watercourses in the Negeb.
 May those who sow in tears
 reap with shouts of joy.
 Those who go out weeping,
 bearing the seed for sowing,
 shall come home with shouts of joy,
 carrying their sheaves.

(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 Mark 10: 17-31 (*Jesus meets a rich man*)

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." '

He said to Jesus, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'

And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'

Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ

P: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 10:21 *"Looking upon him, Jesus loved him, and said, 'You lack one thing...'"*

A rich man came to Jesus. He wanted advice, 'spiritual' advice. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked.

It's the sort of question a well-off person would ask. "What must I *do*? Should I open a TFSA? Should I take Vitamin D? Can you recommend an on-line course in mindfulness? I'm very 'spiritual', Lord. I keep a gratitude journal. But there's a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. It tells me I could be fitter, happier, and more productive. It's time I took my life to the next level. What should I *do*?"

If he hadn't been rich, he wouldn't have said "What should I do?" but "Do *unto* me. Help me, Lord!" Jesus met many who cried, "Help me!" But 'help me' is a confession of helplessness, a state of utter dependence. And we want independence. We're competent people. We have resources at our disposal, including our piles of wealth. And we must have *control* of our resources if we're going to use them, skillfully,

and for the greater good, mustn't we? We can't be 'in control' *and* 'helpless', can we? Isn't this why we unthinkingly cast ourselves in the role of the Good Samaritan, not the victim lying helpless by the side of the road, because to ask for help is to admit defeat? We're the people who *give* help, even if it's the help we give ourselves - *self-help*, in other words.

"Lord, what should I do to help myself, *eternally*, as it were?" the rich man asked. To which Jesus said, "You know the drill." And he rhymed off laws about how to play well with others: "Don't kill, don't steal, don't lie." We could add more. "Treat others as you'd wish to be treated, network with important people, never borrow more than you can repay, save for a down payment, buy life insurance, change your oil regularly, and never run with scissors."

This rich man knew the rules. He followed them. It was a path to success, and he got there. Good for him! But we don't need a Saviour for any of that, do we? So, what did he want from Jesus that he didn't already have the means to obtain for himself?

"Teacher," he said, "There's this *lack* in my life. I want something more." I imagine Jesus' eyes widened at that point, as if to say, "This guy is interesting!"

"Yes, you *do* lack something," he said. "Poverty. You're lacking in 'lack'. You're wanting in 'want'. You're rich in things but poor in soul. Now, you like doing things for yourself. Here's what you do. Sell everything and give the money to the poor. All of it. Be poor in things and rich in soul. Then come and follow me."

"His face *fell*," says St Mark. In Greek, it's the same word used to describe a cloud passing across the face of the sun. He turned and walked away. Why? "*Because, he was very rich*," says St Mark. It's the first time in the gospel story when Jesus says to someone, "Follow me," and that person says, "No, I won't."

Fast forward twenty centuries. We've all said, in effect, "No, I won't," haven't we? Perhaps we don't mean to, and we grin and tell each other we haven't. But the glitter of wealth and the good we can do with it, coupled with the active repression of our feelings of helplessness in the face of our mortality, folded in with our desire for control and our fetish for independence – these all walk us, step by step, further away from Christ, the Gospel, and the Church. For the Gospel was never about 'independent living'. It was about encounter with the deepest source of our deepest dependence in God and living our lives from *there*. That's the 'come, follow me' Jesus extended.

Still, if the Church were to speak to us the way Jesus spoke to the rich man, the world would turn away. For a long time, the Church in the affluent West has behaved as if the story were quite different; as if, when the rich man walked away, Jesus chased after him, and said, "What was I thinking? Forget about giving away your wealth. That's crazy talk. It's all a metaphor anyway. Now, what can I do to convince you to follow me? How may I service you better?"

In his famous book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes in a footnote, "When a Church has to be run by oysters, ice-cream, and fun, you may be sure

it is running away from Christ.” To which I want to say, “Oysters! Why didn’t I think of that?” Oysters and ice cream? Bread and circuses? This ‘worked’ for the Church in the affluent West, sort of, maybe, for a while, until it didn’t. The tide we’ve been surfing took us further out to sea, *away* from Christ, and now we’re sinking.

Let’s face it. Sophisticated people, awash in wealth, enjoying the fruit of their skill and labour (or if they’re very wealthy, enjoying the fruit of *other* people’s labour) don’t need self-help advice from the Church so they can better manage the lives they’re already living. Oprah and Deepak Chopra have that market cornered. Neither do people in our affluent neighbourhood crave a divine endorsement of their independent style of life. That’s why they no longer baptise their children. They feel no need. Meanwhile, the Church still markets the benefits of divine endorsement as if it were a medieval indulgence. But no one’s buying it anymore. No matter how friendly or fun clergy pretend to be, children yawn in their presence. (Adults stifle theirs.) Maybe we just need more oysters? No, I don’t want to play that game anymore.

The gnawing feeling eating away at the pit of the rich man’s stomach was not hunger. It was indigestion. Not a lack but a surfeit. Neither was it a niggling worry that, in the game of life, he still had room for improvement at the hands of a capable coach like Jesus, someone to take his life ‘to the next level’, you know, from ‘survive to thrive’. No, the gnawing feeling eating away at the pit of the rich man’s stomach was a niggling fear that his life was a *lie*. The truth his life suppressed was the truth of his own helplessness in the face of his own mortality. The truth his life suppressed was his ultimate lack of control over his own life.

Wealth excels at suppressing these truths. That’s its danger. But money is ‘purchasing power’. To purchase something is to get hold of it, to own it, control it, and do things with it. Humans excel at this. It’s the game of life and we must play it. But it blinds us to our deep-down poverty, our constitutional need for a gift we cannot purchase because it was never for sale in the first place. The Church’s job is to witness to this need and point to its fulfilment.

We’re governed by a Creation beneath our feet which we did not make, cannot purchase, and dare not abuse; *and* by a Redemption from above which we’re helpless to reach, cannot grasp, and dare not turn our back on.

Creation and Redemption were made by God. They’re beyond purchase. They’re a gift. To receive them is, in the very act of receiving, to acknowledge our helplessness, our mortality, and our ultimate lack of control over our own lives.

“Looking on him, Jesus loved him, and said ‘Give it all away and follow me.’” *Looking on him, Jesus loved him.* There are moments when we’re looked on with love, and we *know* we’re loved, and we feel we could do just about anything for the sake of that love. For when love possesses us, our possessions cannot.

Doesn’t the rich man not *know* he’s loved? Do we?

Prayers of Intercession

Lord of life, with all your creatures great and small, we praise for your goodness. In the harvest of land and ocean, in the turning of the seasons and the circling of the earth, you reveal your love for all creation. For the germ within the grain, for the seed within the fruit, and for our own lives, rooted in creation but fulfilled in Christ, we join the whole Church to give you praise.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, we pray for your whole Church. Look upon us in love. You prepare a table before us to satisfy the hungry heart. Strengthen us with the nourishment of your truth, that we may be people of justice and peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Have mercy on those who are sick and suffering in any way, for those with hearts full of grief, bodies tormented by pain, or spirits downcast by despair. Do not let the pain of their affliction and the sorrow of their journey obscure the presence of our Lord at their side.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

As the autumn harvest is gathered in, we give thanks for our daily bread. We pray for those who have not enough, and for those who have too much. Teach us to share, and to cherish people more than profit. Set our hearts on your kingdom of love and justice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who farm the land and all who gather the harvest of the seas, that they may know the dignity and worth of their service, and be justly rewarded for their toil.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering those who have died, with thanks for the communion of saints, who have reaped the harvest of faith, we keep a time of silence in God's presence...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, may we love your creation, all the earth and every grain of sand. May we love every leaf, every ray of your light. May we love the animals. You have given them a capacity for joy untroubled. Let us not trouble them; let us not harass them, let us not deprive them of their happiness, or work against your purpose for them. For we

know that to withhold any measure of love from anything in your care is to withhold that same measure from you.

For all things come from you, and all things desire to return to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

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, forever. *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***