

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

*The 6th Sunday of Easter
10:30 a.m.
17 May 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: O Lord, open thou our lips,

P: And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Eternal God, in you we live and move and have our being. You are so high above us that we cannot comprehend you, yet so deep within us that we can never escape you. We cannot know you except you reveal yourself. We cannot love you except you first love us. Awaken us to your presence today. Call forth our worship from the centre of our souls, through your Son Jesus Christ, in the power of his Spirit among us.

Holy One, you know us as we are. We hold before you the sin and sorrow that weigh us down. Come through the tangled pathway that keeps us from you, isolated, lost, and alone. Find us, who cannot find our way to you, and forgive us. For without your mercy, we cannot forgive each other, nor can we forgive ourselves.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Faithful God, you love us in Jesus Christ. Send his Spirit of truth to dwell within us, that we may turn from what is false, be true to the love you have shown us, and live by the commandments he has taught us; to whom be glory, with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *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

Eternal Wisdom, guide us by your Word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, and in your truth find freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 66: 8-20 *(A song of thanksgiving for salvation)*

Bless our God, O peoples,
 let the sound of his praise be heard,
 who has kept us among the living,
 and has not let our feet slip.
 For you, O God, have tested us;
 you have tried us as silver is tried.
 You brought us into the net;
 you laid burdens on our backs;
 you let people ride over our heads;
 we went through fire and through water;
 yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.
 I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
 I will pay you my vows,
 those that my lips uttered
 and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
 I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings,
 with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
 I will make an offering of bulls and goats.
 Come and hear, all you who fear God,
 and I will tell what he has done for me.
 I cried aloud to him,
 and he was extolled with my tongue.
 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
 the Lord would not have listened.
 But truly God has listened;
 he has given heed to the words of my prayer.
 Blessed be God,
 because he has not rejected my prayer
 or removed his steadfast love from me.

(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**

The Reading for the Day

Acts 17: 22-31 (*St Paul preaches in Athens.*)

‘Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

‘The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

‘From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

‘For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

‘Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

‘While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading.

Acts 17:23 *“What you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you.”*

St Paul faced a difficult crowd in Athens that day. They weren’t hostile or indifferent. They’d heard some of his ‘sound bites’ and were curious to hear more. They just thought they were better and smarter than Paul was. They greeted him with a patronising smile. It’s pretty hard to wedge a new idea into minds that narrow.

Like many Westerners today, who pride themselves on their carefully chosen ‘progressive values’, they looked upon other cultures the way many tourists visit the developing world.

"See how open and unafraid we are?" they tell each other. "Here we are riding a camel for the first time! Here we are tasting strange foods you can't even buy in the international section of Loblaws! You've got to hand it to these people. So friendly. They do try. One day they'll reach the level we've reached – once we've given them a leg up."

"Tell us about your little god, Paul."

"I'd be happy to," said Paul. "Because I can see how religious you are. So many shrines! So many altars and idols! So many gods! Wow. We just have the one God."

If you visit our cemeteries today, you get a hint of how many divinities we now worship too. In the older sections, you'll find evidence of a common heritage: crosses, some stars of David, scriptural allusions, figures of angels, Jesus, lambs, and references to the classical world. They're attempts to enfold the story of this particular life, commemorated on this plot of ground, within a larger and much, much older story; as if to say, "Only the 'big story' can make sense of our little lives."

But with the loss of our collective 'big story', secular symbols have appeared: headstones engraved with the logo of a favourite hockey team, or images of golf clubs, Disney characters, the family cottage or farm, or the coat of arms of a city, a local school, or a fraternal order. Future archeologists will say, "These must be the gods they worshipped. The 18th hole was their quaint image of an afterlife. Donald Duck and Harry Potter were their priests." They remind me of those ancient shrines in Athens dedicated to smaller, local gods – Poseidon, Artemis, Dionysus – though I don't wish to demean those heroic Greek gods.

Paul could see that, like all humans, they were reaching for something bigger that they didn't yet know, or had forgotten, or rejected, which is knowledge of the one true God "in whom we live and move and have our being." He could see it in the little shrine, off in a corner, dedicated 'to an unknown god'.

"What you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you," he said. Then he told them about Jesus and the resurrection.

This may be the point when most of them stopped listening. It's why most of us never mention Jesus outside the Church.

"Who are *you* to call us ignorant?" they'd have asked. "It's beneath us – we cultured, educated Athenians who practically *invented* science and statecraft – to be taught by a backwater Jewish mystic like you, who can't hold a job, whose own people dislike him intensely, and who traipses around the Mediterranean on a Roman passport (who gave you that?), peddling a weird story about a rebellious, crucified peasant who rose from the dead (are you kidding me?), whom you claim is the full, final revelation of the one true God. Right."

Make no mistake. Christianity is a strange business. This God cannot be enshrined in our little systems of thought, politics, society, and culture. "The God who made everything does not live in shrines made by human hands," said St Paul.

Whenever people have cropped the gospel to fit it more easily into our little systems, the gospel has died there. But whenever it has taken root in people's lives, transforming them, it has also enlivened society, transforming the 'systems' of the world all around it.

God's true shrine is the universe itself, and God's image is enshrined in us. Jesus reveals it. In him we live, and move, and have our being.

Prayers of Intercession

God our Creator, we praise you for your handiwork in shaping and sustaining your wondrous creation. Hear the Church's prayers.

We thank you, Loving Lord, for the gift of the body of your Son, the Church. We sometimes say Church has a place in our lives; but truly, our place is in within the life of your Church. We thank you for calling people of every continent and colour, every culture and language, to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Though we are dispersed and cannot gather, shed your light on Elmwood Avenue Church. Let that light guide us each day, and shine upon others with compassion.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for patience and calm. If our hearts are hard, soften them. If our minds are bound, free them. If our souls are rigid, break their stubborn moulds. Write your name in our hearts. Be our strong tower of defence, our comfort in every pain. Guide us through danger and temptation, and renew your Spirit within us.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for places visited by calamity and tragedy: for those dying of hunger and disease, for victims of racism, war and terror. We do not know why the world must be this way. We ask you why, but cannot hear your answer, and it troubles our faith in you. On the path to truth, dear Lord, teach us first to love as you have loved, to heal and forgive each other, and to reach out with hands ready to receive the blessings of life, and to give them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer.

Look with compassion on those with whom we argue and fight, at home and in our daily living. We pray for those who annoy us, and for those estranged from us, because of misunderstanding or betrayal, or something we have done and now regret. Gracious God, you have made us in such a way that we need one another, but because we do not know how to love everyone, help us to start with those by our side.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer.

We praise you for all the saints of every age, and especially for those who have been dear to us, who have died. Nourish our lives with the memory of their words and deeds, and all they accomplished in their time. Trusting we are bound to them, through you, in the communion of saints, we hope for that day of days when we shall feast with them in the world to come...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)....*

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer.

O God, you have prepared for those who love you joys beyond understanding. Pour into our hearts such love, that, trusting you above all else, we may obtain your promises, which exceed all we can hope or desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever.

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**