

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

*The 9th Sunday after Pentecost  
25 July 2021*

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

*Opening Words*

L: Lord, to whom can we go?

**P: You have the words of eternal life.**

L: Let us worship God.

*Prayers of Adoration and Confession*

God most holy, out of love that cannot be measured you made all that is. Out of grace that cannot be exhausted you hold all things in being. And into the light that cannot be extinguished you call us to live. We worship and adore you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful One, you see us truly. Have we been untrue to you, to others, and to ourselves? Have our thoughts, words, and deeds been empty of faith, hope, and love? Memories haunt us of good words we could have spoken, but did not, and good deeds we could have done, but did not. We want to be forgiven and to trust in your mercy. Teach us to forgive each other as well.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

**P: Christ, have mercy upon us.**

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious God, you have placed within the hearts of all your children a longing for your Word and a hunger for your truth. Grant that, believing in the One whom you have sent, we may know him to be the true bread of heaven and the food of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be glory and honour, now and forever. *Amen*

*An Assurance of Pardon*

L: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world." 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 One, nourish us now with the word of life and the bread of blessing; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 14** (*Corruption abounds but God's justice will prevail*)

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'  
 They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;  
 there is no one who does good.  
 The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind  
 to see if there are any who are wise,  
 who seek after God.  
 They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse;  
 there is no one who does good,  
 no, not one.  
 Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers  
 who eat up my people as they eat bread,  
 and do not call upon the Lord?  
 There they shall be in great terror,  
 for God is with the company of the righteous.  
 You would confound the plans of the poor,  
 but the Lord is their refuge.  
 O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!  
 When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people,  
 Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

*(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 6: 1-21** (*Jesus feeds a multitude*)

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy

bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.'

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'

Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.'

Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.

But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'

Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

**P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St John 6:15** *"Jesus realised they were about to take him by force to make him king..."*

He'd just fed a famished crowd with five barley loaves and two fish. It was a peasant's meal, offered by a clever boy who'd thought to bring his lunch.

"But it's not enough. There's never enough. What's the point?" said Andrew (my namesake, prone to point out the downside). But in Jesus' hands, our poverty is the vehicle for his abundance. *That's the point.*

Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and shared it, as though this were Holy Communion, which, in a way, it was.

St John never calls these deeds ‘miracles’. He calls them ‘signs’. Signs point beyond themselves to the thing they signify. An ancient definition of a sacrament is this: it’s an outward sign of an inward grace. In St John’s Gospel, we’re in a world full of signs, symbols, sacraments, all of them conveying the deeper meanings of grace.

The leftovers filled twelve baskets. Why twelve? Perhaps because Israel had twelve tribes. More than the feeding of empty stomachs, this is about making things whole and complete. Just as we have the right number of chairs around the dining room table, so that at suppertime we can say, “There are no empty seats, all four of us are here” – or “all six of us,” or whatever the number in the household is – so the number *twelve* in the Bible stands for the complete community. “All twelve are here. No one’s missing. No one goes hungry.” For a wonderful moment, everything feels complete.

There’s an incompleteness in each of us, an emptiness that wants to be filled. And there’s nothing as urgent as an empty stomach. Hunger returns again and again, and it’s not just a hunger for food.

When we hunger for something, and we obtain it, we *do* feel, briefly, transiently, satisfied – *for a moment*. But the feeling is fleeting, the restlessness returns, and so does our hunger, our quest for completion.

This is what life is like. And this is what life is largely about. It’s a quest for *bread* – yet not just ‘bread’, but whatever it is that bread is a *sign* of. We tell ourselves: “If I could just marry that person, or get that job, or buy that house, or win that award, or make that round-the-world trip, I’d be completely satisfied forever and ever.”

And we *are* satisfied. Until we’re not. Again.

This is a hard truth: *the truth of hunger’s certain return*. It has made some think our need for these satisfactions was never valid in the first place, but worthy of scorn, and our salvation should be to flee this temporal, material world, where every fulfilment is partial and passing, and every joy is false precisely *because* it’s fleeting.

But the genius of the Christian story of our salvation (a genius bequeathed by Judaism) is not the offer of eternal oblivion. It’s not escape from the world of time and things. It’s the offer of a *deeper* immersion into the world of time and things. It’s the call really to *live* this adventure of loss and recovery, to find what we’re hungry for here and now, to suffer through it, and then to find God’s Spirit already ready to meet us and feed us, body and soul.

The crowds misread Jesus. He fed their physical hunger once – *for now*. But their full-stomach-feeling awakens a sinister ambition.

“They were about to take him by force, to *make* him their king,” says St John.

They would force this Messiah King to be their in-house Celebrity Chef, the one who’ll feed them forever, to service them at their bidding the next time they’re hungry.

They want their religious ritual to be a vending machine they can turn to whenever they want a spiritual snack. They want to put God in a box.

Why? Because they never want to feel the pangs of hunger again, that's why.

This, too, is the human quest. But it leads us away from our true path and launches us down a dark one. And Jesus won't allow it. He won't let himself be taken by force, to be made into a puppet king who'll make us feel 'safe' and 'good' by stuffing our cupboards with an endless supply of stuff. That's not what this 'sign' is about.

Instead, he'll feed us with the 'bread of life', the infinite source of life. This 'source' can't be owned or controlled by us. Yet it never runs out. That's what 'infinite' means. There's always enough – more than enough – of God's mercy. And this mercy answers our heart's deepest hunger, again and again.

But we cannot own it. We cannot be in charge of it. We must *depend* upon it.

The irony, of course, is that by the end of the gospel story Jesus turns out to be a king who *can* be taken by force after all. Roman soldiers crown him with a crown of thorns and frog-march him to his throne. His throne is a cross. They crucify him there.

But that time had not yet come. Jesus slipped away that day. It was evening when he returned. He walked on the surface of the sea and met his disciples on the shoreline, as he'd do all over again after the first Easter.

In the Hebrew mind, the sea was the empty part of God's creation, the chaotic part most in need of redemption. Chaos is hungry for order and meaning. So are the empty, chaotic regions of our own lives.

But Jesus commands these elements too. His walking on water is like God's Spirit hovering over the face of waters in the opening words of the book of Genesis. For the one true source at the genesis of everything is God's desire to call everything into being by speaking the Word that makes and saves.

*Jesus* is God's 'sign'. He is God's saving Word enwrapped in our human flesh. He shares our hunger here and he feeds us from beyond. He is God's gift to us. He satisfies the hungry heart.

### ***Prayers of Intercession***

Holy Lord, you open wide your hand, giving us our food in due season. Out of your never-failing abundance, satisfy the hungers of body and soul, and lead all people to the feast of the world to come.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Eternal God, you call your Church to venture forth by paths untrodden and through perils unknown. Give us a strong faith to go forth with courage, not knowing where we go, but trusting that your hand will lead us, and your love support us.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for the health of all Nature. Give us a deeper reverence for life of every kind. Change our toxic ways. We pray for animals that tremble in fear because we treat them with cruelty. Give us gentle hands and kind hearts, to be true friends to animals, and good stewards of life of every kind.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Watch over those who will sleep tonight without their daily bread and will awaken hungry and alone. Comfort the sick, O Lord, bless the dying, relieve the suffering, and cheer the sorrowful, all for your love's sake.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for places of turmoil and civil unrest, wherever there is hunger, loss of hope, and loss of life. Be near to judge and to save wherever evil is visited upon people. Give to those who govern the nations a deeper humility, a love of service, and your wisdom to know true justice.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We remember those who have died, grateful for the promise of our risen life in Christ. Take us into your care and keeping. Let no evil befall us. When our days are ended and our work is finished, grant that we may depart in your peace, in the sure hope of an eternal day without night, light without darkness, and life without the shadow of death...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Holy One, teach us the wisdom of your way in Jesus Christ, that we may always see your goodness. 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**