



**Birchcliff Bluffs United Church**

**Ministers:** All the People – wherever and however they gather

**The Rev. Gregory Daly:** revgregbbuc@rogers.com

**Music Director:** Randy Vancourt

**May 17, 2020 - Sixth Sunday of Easter**

WE GATHER AS GOD'S PEOPLE

**Prelude**

**The Love of Christ**

Music: Carl Gotthelf Glasser

**Call to Worship (based on Psalm 66)**

Come and celebrate!

Shout joyfully to God!

Glorify God with your praise!

*Everything on earth will worship and sing praise; shouting out in joyful songs.*

Come and see what God has done; awesome things done for us!

*Let the whole world sing praise.*

*Our lives are in God's hands, God keeps our feet from stumbling.*

*Let us raise our hands and stomp our feet in worship.*

**Response**

**Worship Our God**

**VU 401**

Words: Fred Kaan 1972 © 1974 Hope Publishing Company

Music: © 1976 Ron Klusmeier

Worship our God, worship our God  
Praise the Creator, the Spirit, the Son,  
Raising our hands, raising our hands  
in devotion to God who is one!

Raising our hands as a sign of rejoicing,  
and with our lips our togetherness voicing,  
giving ourselves to a life of creativeness,  
worship and work must be one!

Worship our God, worship our God  
Praise the Creator, the Spirit, the Son,  
Raising our hands, raising our hands  
in devotion to God who is one!

## Life & Work of the Church



## Land Acknowledgement & Candle Lighting

As we prepare for worship we now take a moment to acknowledge this sacred land beside the water on which Birchcliff Bluffs United Church stands.

It has been a site of human activity for many thousands of years.



This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississauga's of the Credit and Scugog, part of the Williams Treaty.

Today, the meeting place around Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. We are grateful for the opportunity to live and work on this territory. We seek to be mindful of broken covenants and the need to strive to make right with all our relations.

## Opening Hymn

### **Holy Spirit, Truth Divine (v.1, 4, 5 & 6)**

**VU 368**

Words: Samuel Longfellow 1864

Music: Leighton George Hayne 1863

Public Domain

- 1 Holy Spirit, truth divine,  
dawn upon this soul of mine.  
Voice of God and inward light,  
wake my Spirit, clear my sight.
  
- 4 Holy Spirit, law divine,  
reign within this soul of mine.  
Be my law, and I shall be  
firmly bound, forever free.
  
- 5 Holy Spirit, peace divine,  
still this restless heart of mine.  
Speak to calm this tossing sea,  
grant me your tranquillity.
  
- 6 Holy Spirit, joy divine,  
gladden now this heart of mine.  
In the desert ways I sing;  
spring, O living water, spring!

## Prayer for Grace

*God, we are people who would like to think that we love you  
with all our hearts and souls, with all our might;*

*but there are so many other things in our lives that vie for our attention  
that we often relegate you to Sunday or times when we want you to rescue us.*

*Most of us really do want you to be the one  
in whom we live and move and have our being.  
We really do want to hear your voice  
above all of the other voices in our lives.  
But we get bogged down in our own crisis or routine.  
We forget who we are.  
We forget who you are.  
We forget what we can be together with you and with each other.*

*So we come before you now with our human foibles  
and our short attention spans,  
asking that you would be known to us,  
that you would help us to recognize the Holy that surrounds us,  
that you would continue to challenge us, inspire us,  
and open us to see the Holy in all.  
Amen*

## WE LISTEN FOR GOD'S WORD

### And Now for Something Completely Different

There are things known and  
things unknown and in between  
are the doors.

*Jim Morrison*



## Hymn

### I Can Feel You Near Me God

MV 48

Words and music: Pat Mayberry © 2000

1. I can feel you near me God I can feel you near  
Yes I know you're with me God I feel you here  
I can feel you near me God I can feel you near  
Yes I know you're with me God Heaven is here.

*Refrain:*

And I'll jump for joy I'm singing Alleluia  
Jump for joy for you I will jump for joy  
I'm singing Alleluia Jump for joy for you.

2. I can feel you loving me yes I know you care  
God I know you're loving me always everywhere  
I can feel you loving me yes I know you care  
God I know you're loving me I know you're there.

*Refrain:*

And I'll jump for joy I'm singing Alleluia  
Jump for joy for you I will jump for joy  
I'm singing Alleluia Jump for joy for you.

### **Prayer of Illumination**

*Help us O God, to come to you with open lives to receive your words.*

*May we give them new life as we listen to what you have to say.*

*Open our hearts as we embark on this journey with each other and with you. Amen*

### **New Testament Reading    1 Peter 3:13-22    New Revised Standard Version**

<sup>13</sup> Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup> but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup> yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup> And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

### **Gospel Reading    John 14:15-21    New Revised Standard Version**

<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

<sup>18</sup> “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

The word of God for the People of God

*Thanks be to God*

**Sermon**

**To the Unknown God**

We do like certainty, don't we? As Christians we have enjoyed centuries of being at the top of the religious, cultural, and political heap. For many of us growing up in Canada, particularly within a Northern European context, we have enjoyed the backing of societal structures that reinforced the “Christian way” of doing things: whatever that might mean.

This circumstance has meant that over time it has been easy to consider Christianity to be “right,” and any or all others, “wrong.” This language creeps into the translations as we read them this morning. Although I used a more inclusive translation, recall the well-known words we read last week: “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to God except through me.” So, perhaps not surprising that, along the lines of the language used in the reading from John this morning that suggests others are “godless,” Christianity has often advanced an exclusivity to knowing God. We know this God is a Christian God – or so we have been told, and this way of looking at the world has, I suggest, made it difficult for Christians to see the important contribution that those who profess other understandings of faith can make to our understanding of God. What about God professed by those who are not Christian, what about those whose God is something other than a “Christian God” that we hear about when we show up for Sunday morning services? Who is this unknown God? Or is there even such a thing? A concept of exclusivity of pathways to God that many use John's theology to advance can be, quite frankly, problematic. The narrative in this part of the Gospel of John continues on by revealing that the spirit is to be sent as the personal one who will help believers to accomplish all of this and will act in the world as a means towards the ultimate relationship with Jesus and God in eternal life.



This pronouncement by Jesus exposes for me some problems with how we appreciate this Gospel book. It is part of what we know in 2020 as an ‘us versus them’ mentality. John even goes so far in some of the following passages to suggest that Jesus’ followers have been “chosen” and are hated by the world. The world, in this instance, is anyone who is not a believer or follower of Christ. Anyone who is not a believer is not chosen. Sometimes the direction of John’s scorn is towards the Jews. In our reading today, ‘the Jews’ are not singled out, but it is clear that John’s Christology associated with redemption is a broad rejection of all ‘unbelievers.’

Those who believe seem somehow to be set apart from others as if the troubles of the world need not be a big deal. Believers appear to be given advantage by God in the name of Jesus. I struggle with this as it takes the concept of personal salvation to a level which can be understood

as exclusionary. The Jesus I am reading about here might appear to be more concerned with those who have accepted and followed Him. There is an element of judgement here that arises from the distinction between ‘believers’ and ‘nonbelievers.’

Jesus in John is, by virtue of this early Johannine community’s circumstance, a divine saviour of the chosen people. The people that John is writing to are a young community, just like the people that Peter is speaking to in his writing. They are trying to make sense of who they are in the context of this Jesus person, while the world around them - both the Jewish community and the Roman authorities - consider them social outcasts. This community places Jesus on a very high pedestal because this responds to and releases them from their low place in a societal context. This community rejection forms the basis upon which Jesus becomes the elevated alternative to their circumstance. When we read John, this is part of why we hear of relationship with Jesus as a personal experience rather than the communal journey of Old Testament Judaism. For me, the Gospel of John needs to be understood, like the rest of canonical scripture, within this context.

It is important to realize that out of that community, a persecuted community, have come invaluable resources, woven together with others to produce the rich tapestry we know today as the Christian church and its faith. But it would be interesting for those people to live in this time, the Christianity we know as the religion of choice for so long, which permeates everything that Canada and much of the Western World represents. How would those early persecuted Christians understand how Christianity today views those for whom Christianity has been a dominating and oppressive force for so long?

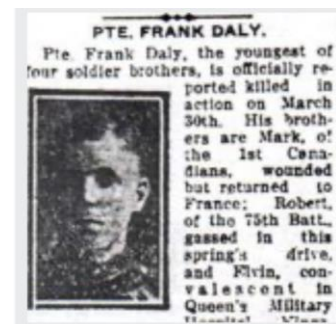
Would the God that we know, be an unknown God to them? Scripture does not exist in isolation. Part of the rich tapestry that John weaves is a love for personal encounter with Jesus. This is both the strength and the weakness of John. It speaks of an intimacy that is appealing but we know that it can be used as an exclusionary tool by some in the Church to impugn and cast out others.



A few years ago, Joseph and I were with my parents in Ottawa and visited the tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the National War Memorial. I looked at it, I pondered it, and I tried to capture who this tomb represents, then my mother made what was really an offhand comment: “that could be your great Uncle in there.” My father’s uncle died in World War I, Suddenly my whole understanding flipped, I was challenged to see this Unknown Soldier a different way. I could know this person; they have shaped who I am through my father; they are a part of me and I of them. Suddenly the unknown soldier is known. How many tombs of unknown soldiers are there? What if we took the time to know them, might that change our fear towards others, might that change how we treat each other. Perhaps it is

the same with the unknown God, what if we stopped fearing this God, what if we stopped and listened for that voice and recognized how it could shape who we are, and expand how we see each other and the world.

How do we, today at Birchcliff Bluffs, be a community that is not driven by fear of others? How do we live out our faith understanding that Christianity does not have the exclusive on God?



What might it mean for us to listen to the God of others, an unknown God that might challenge us to open ourselves to new contexts and new understandings?

While Peter and John speak to people learning who Jesus is, this young community was clearly learning that belief and action are intended to work hand in hand. For all of my concerns with the context that I read John in, I do like the wording of this – “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you.” I don’t think there could be a simpler, clearer statement than this. What Jesus has **told** us is to love one another as self. What Jesus has **told** us is to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. Furthermore, what Jesus **did** was to sit with strangers. What Jesus **did** was to listen to people whom others would not listen to; and to accept into his circle of friends and acquaintances people who society marginalizes.

Jesus spoke and acted with authenticity, Jesus lived out what he believed and challenged us to do likewise. While it is not possible to attribute all the statements in John to the historical Jesus, the thrust of the message, even in its context and even with its problematic issues is to live your faith in action and to live it authentically. I believe the Church today is charged with applying these principles of encounter and relationship in a world that is intercultural and interfaith.

If we are living out our faith then we are necessarily engaging an unknown God. Certainly, that is the case in much of what we call the “Christian world.” This is a God who loves and lives with the outcast, a God who challenges power and status quo, a God who dares us to “love our enemy.” Let’s get to know this unknown God, found in the eyes and the hearts of all people wherever they come from, whatever they believe, whoever they are.

## Hymn

### **They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love**

Words & Music by Peter Scholtes

© 1966, F.E.L. Publications

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in the land

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love

We will work with each other, we will work side by side  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side  
And we'll guard human dignity and we'll save human pride

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

All praise the Creator from whom all things come  
And all praise to Christ Jesus, God's only Son  
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

## WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD

### Offering



### Prayers of the People

Gracious and loving God,  
the Psalmist reminds us that,  
'You are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.'

God, we feel deeply that our world is in trouble  
with the spread of the coronavirus.  
There is a heightened sense of fear and anxiety about the future.

We ask that we may calmly and lovingly trust in you  
and care for all who are affected by this pandemic.  
Please bless the work of health professionals,  
government officials, aged care providers, school and community leaders.  
Grant them strength and wisdom.



We pray for all who feel stressed and worried,  
that they might find peace and reassurance.  
Free us from panic and selfish stockpiling.  
We pray for all those who mourn the loss of loved  
ones to the virus, that they will find comfort and  
support.

May all our congregations and faith communities  
be places of empathy, compassion and calm in all we  
face.



We ask these things in the name of Jesus who taught to share these words of prayer together saying...

*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 trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power, and the glory  
for ever and ever. Amen.*

#### BLESSING AND SENDING FORTH

#### Closing Hymn

#### **If You Will Trust in God to Guide You**

**VU 286**

Words, Music: Georg Newmark. 1641  
English Translation (v 1 and 3): Catherine Winkworth  
English Translation (v 2): © 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship

- 1     If you will trust in God to guide you,  
          and hope in God through all your ways,  
God will give strength, whate'er betide you,  
          and bear you through the troubled days.  
Who trusts in God's unchanging love  
          builds on the rock that will not move.
  
- 2     God will embrace your pain and weeping,  
          your helpless anger and distress.  
If you are in God's care and keeping,  
          in sorrow will God love you less?  
For Christ, who took for you a cross,  
          will bring you safe through every loss.
  
- 3     Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving;  
          so do your own part faithfully,  
and trust God's word; though undeserving,  
          you'll find God's promise true to be.  
God never will forsake in need  
          the soul that trusts in God indeed.

## **Benediction & Commissioning**

### **Postlude**

### **Forth In Your Name, O Christ**

Music: Robert Schumann



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## Other Resources for Today

### And Now for Something Completely Different

Who is the quote attributable to:

<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/11/17/rock-doors-between/>

## Other Lectionary Readings for Today

### Psalm 66: 8-20      New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> Bless our God, O peoples,  
let the sound of his praise be heard,  
<sup>9</sup> who has kept us among the living,  
and has not let our feet slip.  
<sup>10</sup> For you, O God, have tested us;  
you have tried us as silver is tried.  
<sup>11</sup> You brought us into the net;  
you laid burdens on our backs;  
<sup>12</sup> you let people ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and through water;  
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>13</sup> I will come into your house with burnt offerings;  
I will pay you my vows,  
<sup>14</sup> those that my lips uttered  
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.  
<sup>15</sup> 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. *Selah*  
<sup>16</sup> Come and hear, all you who fear God,  
and I will tell what he has done for me.  
<sup>17</sup> I cried aloud to him,  
and he was extolled with my tongue.  
<sup>18</sup> If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,  
the Lord would not have listened.  
<sup>19</sup> But truly God has listened;  
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.  
<sup>20</sup> Blessed be God,  
because he has not rejected my prayer  
or removed his steadfast love from me.

### Acts 17:22-31      New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor<sup>[a]</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God<sup>[b]</sup> and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> 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.’

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> 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.”