

KOGARAH UNITING CHURCH

July 16th 2023

STRUGGLE

The Gathering of the People of God

WELCOME & GREETING

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.

And also with you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge that this land is God's land, and God's Spirit dwells here. We pay our respects to the elders past, present and emerging of the Biddegal and Gweagal people of the Eora nation, who have cared for this land in time beyond our dreaming. This land on which we live and move was and always will be Aboriginal Land.

KUC STATEMENTS

Our VISION is to:

- to be a loving and caring community, sharing God's love with the world.

Our MISSION is to:

- share God's love in the community,
- create a welcoming and inclusive place
- and provide care and support for all.

Our VALUES:

We are a congregation

who welcome people of all cultures and lifestyles,

who create a safe place for the community

and who share the journey of life and faith.

CALL TO WORSHIP

We bring our hopes and fears,
our struggles and our lives as they are,
into the presence of the One who leaves doors and futures
open to gracious possibilities.

God's word lights the paths before us.

May this time of worship empower us to make faithful
choices.

God's word lights the paths before us.

May this time of worship renew and restore our relation-
ships with God and each other.

God's word lights the paths before us.

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

God is here

God is always here

God is with us

God is always with us

SING: Where the Spirit is there's freedom TIS 421

Where the Spirit is there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

**Not by the world can our freedom be nourished,
not by our things, only by Spirit.**

**Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,
drop all your masks, take freedom's clothing!**

Where the Spirit is there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

**Heaven on earth, here we live free to love and to share,
carried by joy.**

**Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,
daring today to taste God's future!**

Where the Spirit is there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

Wounds will be healed, eyes will be opened,

**imaging God, reflecting Jesus.
Practise, my children, to live by the Spirit,
heaven is here, time made eternal!**

**Where the Spirit is there's freedom.
Where the Spirit is, there is life!**

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OPENING PRAYER

Light up our path, God of Peace,
with voices of our ancestors whispering and singing hope
and encouragement.

Remind us that the union they found in their spirits can
illuminate this moment.

In their wisdom, we can seek wholeness in your Spirit and
find peace in your presence.

Hold us together from generation to generation as the joy in
your heart. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of Peace, we come before you, scattered in the present and separated
from our past.

We play favourites when we shouldn't, hold grudges instead of forgiveness,
and fail to do the work of healing and reconciliation so needed in your world.

It is rocky ground, and we know we cannot grow here.

Show us, God of Peace, the way of love through every division.

Silence.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

Hear the promise of God. Through all these divisions, amidst all these separ-
ations, God offers the Spirit's transformative power for our companion, guide,
and hope.

Thanks be to God.

PEACE

May the peace of God be with you. **And also with you.**

SING: Bring many names beautiful and good TIS 182

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory,
living, loving God.

Hail and hosanna!
bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation,
genius at play:
Hail and hosanna,
strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving
till we're reconciled:
Hail and hosanna,
warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises,
wiser than despair:
Hail and hosanna,
old, aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice,
giving all you have:
Hail and hosanna,
young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing,
everlasting home:
Hail and hosanna,
great, living God!

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The Service of the Word

BIBLE READINGS: GENESIS 25 19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah,

daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

MATTHEW 13 1-9 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears

the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

SING: Thy word is a lamp unto my feet ATE 246

**Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.**

**When I feel afraid, I think I've lost my way,
still you're there right beside me,
nothing will I fear as long as you are near,
please be near me to the end.**

**Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.**

**I will not forget your love for me, and yet
I'll forever be wandering.
Jesus, be my guide, hold me to your side;
I will love you to the end.**

**Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet
and a light unto my path.**

Words: Amy Grant
Music: Michael W. Smith
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REFLECTION – Richard
God is a Foolish Farmer: Sarah Dylan Breuer

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13 - [link to NRSV text](#)
Romans 8:9-17 - [link to NRSV text](#)
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 - [link to NRSV text](#)

"Listen!" It's a word from this Sunday's gospel that stood out to me the moment I scanned the passage. It's a word meant to prick up your ears, a word meant to jolt us out of whatever else we're doing, whatever else we're thinking about or worrying about, and get us to pay attention.

Listen! In this parable, Jesus has a word for us today that feels particularly important, particularly urgent to get across. It's a word that's central to the gospel Jesus preached and lived out among us, and it's a word that I'm glad to leave as one last charge, one last encouragement, and one last blessing to you.

I'm glad that the text for this Sunday contains a parable, because Jesus' parables illustrate three things that I think are true about the Bible in general.

First, it's that the bible isn't always easy to interpret. Often, it's pretty hard. We're talking about texts written thousands of years ago by people who didn't speak our language and are from a completely different culture. Sometimes people say that Jesus' parables are simple truths put in simple language that anyone can easily understand, to which I say, have you read Jesus' parables lately, and closely? They say things like "therefore, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal tents" (Luke 16:9). I don't think that anyone's doing me a favor in telling me that this is easy to understand. If I believe them, when I come across something that I don't understand easily, I'm likely to feel like a particular dolt when it comes to the bible, and that's likely to make me want to avoid picking up the bible, like I want to avoid a gym when I feel like I'm the only person there who hasn't stepped right out of a fitness video.

So if you sometimes find the bible to interpret, take comfort: it IS hard to interpret sometimes. Often, actually.

Here's a rule of thumb that I use for reading Jesus' parables: if I interpret it in such a way that there is nothing surprising or even shocking about it, it's time to go back and read it again. Jesus' parables serve a purpose a little like that of a Zen *koan* – those 'riddles' like "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The point of a *koan* isn't that there's a correct answer that springs instantly into mind. A koan isn't supposed to inform you; it isn't supposed to give you information that will increase your feeling of mastery. If anything, it's the opposite of that. It pulls our minds in to confound them, and that kind of dislocation from our usual ways of thinking helps us to open up and let go of our usual ways of thinking. A *koan* doesn't inform; it *transforms* you as you wrestle with it.

Jesus' parables work kind of like that; each one ends in a shocking reversal of his listeners' expectations. With that reversal, the story pulls us out of entrenched patterns of relationship and ways of being in the world; it dislocates us from what's comfortable to free us to establish new kinds of relationship, new ways of being. If the first thing I want you to remember about the bible is that it's often not easy to interpret, then the second thing I want you to take away about it is that the hard work of wrestling with scripture is more than worthwhile. It's not a product of our culture, so I find there's nothing like it to challenge our cultural assumptions about who God is, what God wants, and what things like love and success and freedom really are. Anne Lamott likes to say that if what you get out of the bible is that God hates all the same people you do, you're in trouble. I'd put it more positively, in saying this: God calls each and every one of us to conversion, to amendment of life so that our life looks more like the wholeness of the life God offers. If I come away from the bible feeling that the problem with the world is that there aren't enough people like me in it, this is a good cue to keep reading, and to keep asking how God is calling *me* to conversion. And no, saying that God wants me to stand up more loudly and firmly against everybody else's sin doesn't count.

I am NOT saying that the point of reading the bible is so that you can feel bad. If your previous exposure to the bible and to how people use the bible makes you think of it as a book that's boring at best and oppressive at worst, then believe me -- I know exactly what you mean. I've seen people try to use the bible as a weapon more times than I can count, as I think many of you can imagine. I hope that knowing that lends even more power to what I have to say when I say that the bible is Good News for God's people -- news of justice, peace, of true freedom and abundant, joyful life. When I say that each one of us is called to conversion, what I'm saying is Good News: there is room in your life and in my life for God to work more deeply. There is room in your heart and in mine for more compassion, more peace, more freedom than we'd thought. I get that Good News in large part from all of the time and energy I put into studying, praying with, and reflecting on scripture, and I hope that in the midst of all my flaws and flubs, some of that Good News has come across. The Good News we experience as we wrestle with scripture in community is well worth the hard work we put into it. That's the second thing I want you to take away from this sermon about the bible.

And if you'll indulge me, I want to say a little about why. Wrestling with scripture intently, prayerfully, and together regularly throughout our lives is worthwhile because, while scripture isn't the only medium through which we find the transformation to which God calls us, I will say that it's one of the most important. When I read scripture, and especially when I come to the bible again and again alongside other people who want to read it carefully and prayerfully, I find myself called to decision. God calls

to each one of us, and each one of us makes a decision about whether to respond and how. The choice that Jesus prescribes for us, the choice that Jesus promises will bring true freedom, real love, real peace, lasting justice, is a decision to follow Jesus, to make Jesus' version of "family" -- God as our father, and the only one who gets that title, and God's children as our sisters and brothers -- the source of our identity and our only permanent loyalty. Some people call that choice being "born again," and I want to take the liberty in this last sermon for St. Martin's to go on record as saying I'm entirely in favor of it. You and I need to be born again -- not once, but for every time that someone tries to tell us with words or actions that we're not God's child, for every time that we're tempted to substitute our culture's vision of respectability for God's dream of the mighty being brought low and the lowly raised up, for every time we forget that God's blessings, love, and justice are for ALL of God's children.

In other words, we need to be born again, and again, and again. In my case, several times a day. Maybe you're quicker on the uptake than I am. But for as many years I've spent intently studying the scriptures, and for as many times as God has, in communities like this and in my travels around the world, given me a glimpse of God's kingdom, I find all of the time that the richness of God's dreams for the world and for each one of us in it is so great and so profound that every further glimpse of it takes my breath away as it takes me by surprise.

A case in point: this Sunday's parable of a farmer who goes out to sow seed. What's so surprising about that? Farmers sow seed all the time. And anyone who knows anything at all about what a plant needs to grow won't be surprised to hear that seed cast in the middle of a road, or on the rocks, or among thorns doesn't grow. But this parable contains not one, but two surprises to jolt us into openness to the work of God's Spirit among us and in our world.

Listen!

It's not at all surprising that most of the seed didn't grow. What's surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it there. This isn't a rich man we're talking about here: this is a poor farmer, a tenant farmer who can only eke out a living for himself and his family if he not only makes wise choices about where to sow, but also is blessed with good weather and a great deal of luck. Good seed is hard to come by; the wise farmer makes sure to entrust the precious grain he has to the best of soil. But this one tosses seed about while standing in the closest thing he can find to the parking lot at Wal-Mart, where the pigeons will eat it if thousands of feet and truck tires don't grind it into the pavement first. In short, this farmer behaves as though that which were most precious was available in unlimited supply. What on earth is he thinking?

But here's the real corker: God blesses a farmer like this beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God's particular and rich blessing. But this foolish farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed on soil everyone knows is worthless is blessed by God in shocking abundance: a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed.

There's been a lot of talk at St. Martin's about scarcity, about guarding closely what's precious because it seems to be rare. Money is tight; time is hard to spare. Even when we're looking at less tangible and measurable qualities we value, like love and blessing, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird. Predictions of peril and doom provoke a great deal of anxiety, and living on a knife edge like that not only causes constant unrest, but also tends to shut down the kind of creative and life-giving vision that energizes us to live more deeply into God's dreams for us as individuals, in community, and for the world. That's not the Good News God has for us:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.
-- Romans 8:15-17

Listen! What does this morning's gospel say to us, in a story that suggests that God is like a farmer who tosses seed into parking lots for the pigeons to eat, and in the surprising harvest that grows? It says that Isaiah's prophetic word is coming true:

*Ho [in other words, **Listen!**], everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy? ...
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;*

*it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace ...
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.
-- Isaiah 55:1-2, 10-13*

The kingdom of God has come among us. God has blessed us richly, and God's people have been entrusted with that which is most precious in the world. But ironically, these priceless commodities only gain value – the seed of God's word only bears fruit – when God's people scatter it absolutely heedless of who is worthy to receive it.

Listen! We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason:

They are. They really are. I believe that with all my heart, and I want to leave you with that as something to hold on to. Thank you for listening.

And thanks be to God!

Sarah Dylan Breuer

SING: Amazing Grace Listen to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVORrx9jliE>

OFFERING

We give with gratitude for your love despite all our imperfections, O God. We will use these offerings to seek more union through our division and greater love through all that separates us. Bring to being in us genuine expressions of your love and grace in our world. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Incorporating SING: The Lord is my light, my light and salvation TIS 747

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

God of each, God of all: we pray for our families, those with whom we are drawn together by birth or by marriage, or by adoption.

May they receive care and love from you and from us as well.

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

We pray for our friends and neighbours, those with whom we are drawn together by common places of work or learning, by common aspirations and values.

Strengthen the ties between us.

May we find in these relationships the freedom and companionship and community that nurture us and the world around us.

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

We pray for our fellow citizens, those with whom we are drawn together by birthplace and nation, by regional ties and societal traditions.

Fashion these bonds to ensure the relationships and ideals we claim are paid more than lip service, so that who we are and have been never closes us to who we may yet become.

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

We pray for those who are part of this community and in the whole Christian Church, those with whom we are drawn together by a common faith and uncommon grace.

**May we thrive in ministry,
may we expand in mission,
may we deepen in spirituality,
and may we grow closer to one another and you.**

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

We pray for those who are fashioned in your image,
with whom we are drawn together in one family.
**Free us to recognize the stranger as no stranger,
but sister and brother.
To see the joy and need of any as the cause for our rejoicing
and compassion.**

**The Lord is my light,
my light and salvation:
in God I trust,
in God I trust.**

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.**

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| The Sending Forth of the People of God |
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BLESSING

Go from this place finding the strength to right any wrongs,
to be the peace brought to division,
to be the love needed within the world.
Go in peace. Amen.

SENDING SONG: Father, bless us as we go - TIS 781

**Father, bless us as we go,
Jesus, walk beside us.
Holy Spirit, guide us.
Father, bless us as we go,
Jesus, walk beside us.
Holy Spirit, guide us.**