



## UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA MELFORT ETHELTON PASTORAL CHARGE

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Website: [www.melfortunitedchurch.com](http://www.melfortunitedchurch.com)

Ministers: All of us

Worship Leaders: Gale Strachan, Bea White

Music:

Music Director: Mavis Peters

Office Administrator: Denise Todosichuk

Caretaker: Faye Greier

Today's Greeter:

Scripture Readers:

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### ORDER OF WORSHIP

June 14, 2020

Second after Pentecost, Year A

#### **WE GATHER AS A COMMUNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE**

*As we gather for worship today we acknowledge that the land on which we gather is Treaty 6 Territory. We honour the Cree and Métis people for whom this place has been a homeland for thousands of years. We respect the sacredness of our home and the ground on which we walk and we are grateful to gather here in peace and hope.*

#### **ANNOUNCEMENTS, ANNIVERSARIES & CONCERNS:**

#### **CALL TO WORSHIP:**

From the north and from the south, from the east and from the west, from (*neighbouring town*) and from (*neighbouring town*),

**God calls us together to worship and serve.**

Out of poverty and wealth, out of health and disease, out of whatever circumstance in which we live,

**God calls us together to worship and serve.**

Out of a spirit of jubilation and despair, out of times of hope and uncertainty, out of whatever state our heart is in,

**God calls us together to worship and serve.**

Come, let us worship.

**OPENING PRAYER:** *(in unison)*

You name us, O God,  
with grace we do not fully grasp;  
for you call us to love as we have been loved.

You send us, O God,  
to persons and communities in need;  
for you call us to see and respond with compassion.

In following your call,  
strengthen us to follow  
your example in Christ Jesus. Amen.

**PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE:** *(in unison)*

Gracious Host of Heaven and Earth,  
we celebrate your invitation  
to worship and serve in your name.

We are honoured by your call  
and long to answer in faithfulness.

Yet we confess those attitudes and allegiances  
which hold us back:

fear... discouragement... guilt...  
laziness... lack of confidence... greed...  
self-centredness... lack of compassion...  
and all other things that lie in our hearts.

May we hear you speak our names.  
And pray that you will fill us with courage  
so we might move forward in faith  
and respond with compassionate love. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:**

You have been named by God  
and called by the Spirit of Christ  
to serve in this world.

Live in faith and proclaim the good news of God.

**SPECIAL MUSIC:** “*Who Am I*” – Linnea Good

Link to YouTube: <https://youtu.be/acWqrA5sdtM>

**WE LISTEN FOR GOD’S WORD TO US**

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS:**

- RESPONSORIAL READING:**      **PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19** (VU  
p. 836)  
*I called upon God in the face  
of death.*
- HEBREW READING:**            **GENESIS 18:1-15, (21:1-7)**  
*Son promised to Abraham  
and Sarah.*
- EPISTLE READING:**            **ROMANS 5:1-8**  
*Justified by faith.*
- GOSPEL READING:**            **MATTHEW 9:35--10:8,**  
**(9-23)**  
*Jesus and the disciples  
preach and heal.*

## **SERMON:**

### **Sarah: On Laughter and Lying**

At a strategic meeting of our church leaders my friend June asked an awkward but important question that caught some people off-guard. The result was predictable—nervous laughter, even though there was nothing even remotely funny about the matter she raised. Laughter, in fact, has many voices that reveal different things about us.

Derision and scorn can explode in a sarcastic laughter that intends to humiliate. The giggles of children, entirely unselfconscious, hearten us with their unfettered joy. Poking fun at our human frailty, foibles, and the occasional *faux pas* is almost always healthy. As for jokes, our family likes to say that we laugh three times—when we hear the joke, when it is explained to us, and then when we finally understand it. In the Genesis story for this week we encounter yet another type of laughter, the dismissive laughter of incredulity. The matriarch Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed at God's improbable promise to her, and then lied in a ploy to deny her doubt.

Standing at the entrance to their tent, Sarah eavesdropped on Abraham as he conversed with three travelers who visited him, and who prophesied that "about this time next year Sarah your wife will bear a son." This was the second time that Abraham had received this promise; when he heard it the first time he "fell face down, laughed, and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'" Sarah responded in an identical manner when she overheard the stupendous suggestion: "So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?'" The ecstasy of erotic pleasure? The joy of a newborn baby? Sarah laughed in disbelief. But God rebuked her for her doubt, at which point she then lied and denied: "Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, 'I did not laugh.' But he said, 'Yes, you did laugh.'" (17:17; 18:10–15).

Sarah doubted and denied, she laughed and she lied, because of the "absurd disproportion between the divine promise and the human possibility."<sup>1</sup> Her response was entirely human, and not really surprising. From a human perspective her disbelief was warranted, even appropriate. People do not procreate in old age. But her unbelief also evoked a rhetorical rebuke in the punch line of the narrative: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (18:14).

When I was in seminary my classmate Phil coined a wonderful term for that sort of religious faith that has a firm and unwavering belief in a tame and innocuous divinity, faith which does not have any expectation that God will meddle in human affairs, intercede in your life, providentially guide human history, care for a loved one, heal the hurts we suffer, or—God forbid—do the impossible. Phil characterized that sort of tepid faith as "functional deism." Functional deism never denies the existence or reality of God, but it also never expects His decisive action in your personal affairs. Yahweh thus rebuked Sarah for her timid faith in a tiny god.

God did not shame Sarah in a punitive manner. Quite the contrary. We read that "the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." In a delightful double entendre, they named their son Isaac, which in Hebrew means "he laughs." Their son of laughter would

always remind them of their disbelief, but also testify to how God fulfilled His promises and acted in their personal history despite improbable and unbelievable circumstances. Whereas Sarah had brought her nervous laughter to God's promise, in the end the tables were turned: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age" (21:1–7).

The story of Sarah's disbelief, doubt, laughter, lies and denial conveys not only an appropriate rebuke, and a reminder of God's mighty power to act in the most hopeless of circumstances. The narrative also communicates a sense of consolation. We normally think of Abraham and Sarah as paragons of faith and virtue, and with good reason given how differently the New Testament remembers them (cf. Romans 4:18–25, Hebrews 11:11, and 1 Peter 3:6). But the original Genesis story demonstrates how God's drama of salvation is not a story of stellar saints so far removed from our own experiences that we could never hope to emulate them, but of down and dirty sinners, messy characters portrayed with their considerable faults and failures.

Acting out his own fears, Abraham lied about his wife Sarah saying she was his sister. Both he and Sarah scoffed at God's promise of progeny. Commenting on the untidy and unsavory nature of the Biblical characters, Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

One of the remarkable characteristics of the biblical way of training us to understand history and our place in it is the absolute refusal to whitewash a single detail...The history in which our Scriptures show that God is involved is every bit as messy as the history reported by our mass media in which God is rarely mentioned apart from blasphemies. Sex and violence, rape and massacre, brutality and deceit do not seem to be congenial materials for use in developing a story of salvation, but there they are, spread out on the pages of our Scriptures. It might not offend some of us so much if these flawed and reprobate people were held up as negative examples with lurid, hellfire descriptions of the punishing consequences of living such bad lives. But the [biblical] story is not told quite that way. There are punishing consequences, of course, but the fact is

that all these people, good and bad, faithful and flawed, are worked into the plot of salvation. God, it turns out, does not require good people in order to do good work. As one medieval saying has it, "God draws straight lines with a crooked stick." He can and does work with us, whatever the moral and spiritual condition in which he finds us. God, we realize, does some of his best work using the most unlikely people.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to our situation today, who would have believed God, if he had told us in 2019 we would be experiencing a Covid 19 Pandemic in 2020- if he had told us we would be forced to quarantine in our homes, avoid personal contact with our families, friend, acquaintances and literally cut ourselves off from society, in general, except for essential services; if he had told us there would be no live entertainment, only entertainment generated with our homes, schools closed, workers working from home, fears, lockdowns, isolation, deaths and even dying alone.

We like, Abraham and Sarah, would have found the news to be incredulous in a country such as Canada. We, too, may have laughed.

It is during times like this we need to continue to "recognize the importance of the variety of our relationship with God – the good times and the bad - and emphasize the importance of maintaining this relationship. Reflecting on this over time, can provide insights on how God is at work in our lives, even in times of silence.

God keeps his promises regardless of our behavior and faithfulness."

Thanks to God.

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[1] Editorial comment from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (1991), on Genesis 18:12.

[2] Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 140-141.

**Link to Sermon:**

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20050606JJ.shtml>

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## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

We need people to work with the spirit of Jesus.

**Then the politicians will be held accountable for the plight of low-income families and the lack of adequate housing.**

**Then the need for pure air and the preservation of good land for our grandchildren will be taken seriously.**

**Then a college or university education will be available to all, regardless of status or economic realities.**

**Then those advanced in years will be respected.**

We pray that people will hear the call,

**and work with the spirit of Jesus.**

We need people to work with the spirit of Jesus.

**Are there those who will identify the suffering and insist on care for them?**

**Are there those who will stand beside former prisoners and advocate with prospective employers for them?**

**Are there those who will listen carefully to the stories of those who are addicted and help them find another way and higher power?**

**Are there those who will sit with the sick and frightened who have no one to share their fear?**

**Are there those who will listen to persons who have experienced a crushing loss?**

**We remember those we know who are suffering.**

**As we pray, we remember our families, friends, and those in our church family. (*time of silent reflection*)**

We pray that people will hear the call,

**and work with the spirit of Jesus.**

And God calls us, each one of us, to work with the spirit of Jesus.

**We will be motivated to discover and work out our ministries.**

**We will ignore the attractions of better money or benefits if the work is not faithful.**

**We will not fear the stigma of being thought “religious” or “pious” or too heavenly to be of any earthly use. We will not fear the threats of the powerful or the scorn of those who “know it all.”**

**We will remember the caring, empathetic work of Jesus and simply find our own sphere to do that work. It is our prayer that when we hear God’s call, we will joyfully respond and work in the spirit of Jesus.**

*Pastoral Prayers to Share: Year A by David Sparks.*

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## **THE LORD’S PRAYER:** *(in unison)*

**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 and the power,**

**and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

## **SENDING FORTH**

### **COMMISSIONING & BLESSING:**

The harvest is large,

but there are not many workers to gather it in.

**We are God’s servants.**

Jesus gathered his followers

and sent them out to change the world.

**We are God’s servants.**

To proclaim the gospel. To heal.

To bring new life. To challenge injustice.

**We are God’s servants.**

Jesus sends disciples to be his hands, his feet, his voice.

**We are God’s servants.**

And yet there are risks involved in being disciples.

**We are God’s servants.**

Go and serve in the name and power of Jesus Christ.

**We are God's servants.**

**PRAYER RESOURCES:**

*\*Seasons of the Spirit – Seasons FUSION Lent, Easter 2020;  
The United Church of Canada Pentecost 2020 Year A  
Gathering Resources for Worship Planners. Used with  
permission.*

**NEXT WEEK'S (June 21, 2020) READINGS:**

*Genesis 21:8-21);  
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17;  
Romans 6:1b-11;  
Matthew 10:24-39.*

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**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**THIS WEEK AT MELFORT UNITED CHURCH:**

Church Office Hours:

Wednesday & Thursday: 9 am – 3 pm

**Passing of Gerri Wurtz**

Our condolences to Bryan and family on the passing of Gerri Wurtz. Gerri passed away on June 5<sup>th</sup>. A memorial service will be held at a later date.

**Pastoral Care - Contact Information**

Should you need emergency pastoral care please call Ron Nielsen @ 306-921-7794 or 306-752-4119.

**Transfer or Applying for Membership**

If you wish to transfer or apply for membership in our church, please contact the church office or a member of the Membership Committee.

**Changes to Contact Information**

If you have changed your address or phone number, please advise the Church Office so that we can keep your information current. Thank you!