

First Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<https://fpresbyterian.ca> Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 14, 2021

Words of Welcome

Trust is an important word to describe the best in relationships. When we trust others, we allow ourselves to be shaped by them, to have experiences with them. To be vulnerable with them. I have a question for you. Do you trust Jesus? The answer can be simple but deep. Let's begin with a call to worship.

Call to Worship (inspired by John 3:14-21)

Friends of God, believe this –
God loved the world,
God loves the world,
we are the beloved!

May the truth of this great love story,
shine through our worship today,
and renew our sense of calling.

So come, with your tiredness,
your frustrations and your discouragements;
come with your doubts, your fears,
and your longings;
come, to discover yet again
how Jesus reveals God's love and mercy.

Come, in friendship to God
and to each other,
and in friendship to the world,
to listen for God's Word to us,
to offer our prayers,
and to renew our calling.

Friends of God,
let us worship! ~ written by Ann Siddall, and posted on the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre website. <https://stillpointsa.org.au/>

Hymn

What wondrous love is this

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1. What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, that caused the Lord of bliss
to lay aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
to lay aside his crown for my soul.

2. To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing,
to God and to the Lamb, I will sing.
To God and to the Lamb, who is the great I AM,
while millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing,
while millions join the theme, I will sing!
3. And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on.
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be,
and through eternity I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and through eternity I'll sing on!

Words: public domain

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Gracious God,
Great and wonderful are your works!
Your steadfast love is everlasting.
You have come among us in Christ Jesus to save us.
Where there is darkness, you bring light.
Where there is sadness, you speak words of hope.
Where there is despair, you bring new possibilities.
You bring healing for the sick, and forgiveness for the sinner.
You bring justice for the oppressed, speaking truth instead of lies.
Stir us with your Spirit, O God, in this time of worship.
Awaken our joy and reverence
as we offer you our songs and our silence, our prayers and praises,
for you are our God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

Merciful God,
Even as we praise you, we are aware of our failures as your disciples.
We take your love and acceptance of us for granted.
We are often careless with our relationships,
more focused on ourselves than on you or those around us.
We spend our days distracted by the news,
rather than seeking your light and truth.
Forgive us.

God of light and truth, send your Holy Spirit to move in us and among us this day.
Speak to us through the scriptures, read and interpreted, so that they lead us to
encounter your Living Word, Jesus Christ.
Awaken our spirit of commitment and compassion.
Give us a new vision of your purposes and our place within them,
so we may serve you more faithfully, day by day. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Friends in Christ, by grace we have been saved through faith.
This is not our doing but God's gift to us.
Know that God forgives you, and forgive one another.
So may the peace of Christ be with you.

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Scripture Reading John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Trusting Jesus

When I was a kid, we did something called trust falls. I really only recall doing them with my brother who is five years older than me. I knew he was strong enough to catch me, plus he's a nice guy, so I was sure he would let me get hurt. Trust falls were a thing before I was born and turns out they are still a thing. In fact, you can find compilation videos of hundreds of trust falls. There is a trust fall challenge where you walk near someone, turn your back and fall, just to see if their reaction is to let you fall or catch you. Evidence from the videos shows that you are taking your chances as sometimes you luck out and other times you don't.

For those of you who may be wondering what I am talking about, a trust fall is when you turn with you back to another and trust that they are standing ready to catch you as you fall backward. Then without reservation you let yourself fall into the arms of someone trusting that they will catch you.

One of the funniest of these videos was recorded 2012. It has over six million views. It appears that, what I think are two sisters, are going to do a trust fall with dad watching, coaching, and filming. The girl in the front crosses her arms over her chest as the other

goes behind ready to catch her as she falls back. The girl in the front completely trusts the other, but they forgot to tell her to fall backward and not forward. Well as you may have guessed she did a major face plant onto the floor. But she completely trusted and did not for a moment stretch out her arms to break the fall!¹

One of the Christian thinkers I follow is a Presbyterian professor who works out of Minneapolis at Luther Seminary by the name of Matt Skinner. In an article this week² he suggested that one replace the word trust for the word believe in the scripture reading today. Let's try that and see if it brings a little more clarity to the meaning behind the words.

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever *trusts* in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who *trusts* in him may not perish but may have eternal life... ¹⁸Those who *trust* in him are not condemned; but those who do not *trust* are condemned already, because they have not *trusted* in the name of the only Son of God.

Reading in this way is not to suggest that believing and trusting are necessarily the same thing, but it may be something close enough to help us understand what the writer of John's gospel was getting at. When we trust someone, it is often by their actions, their response to us, how we see them treating others, that we come to believe we can trust them or not. Have they followed through on their words? Have they been faithful in their relationships? Have they acted honourably?

Now trust is not always a positive thing. You likely know someone, some organization, maybe even a church, that you trust will hurt you if you encounter them.

In the case of Jesus, his actions and words, healed people, lifted up those who were poor, hungry, in need of justice. Those who wrote of him after his death, resurrection, and ascension were sharing their experiences of someone they had come to trust, someone they knew loved and cared for them and others. Someone who acted with compassion. And because of this they also believed his words, his promises, and their experiences of him.

“For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes [trusts] in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In this verse, that is the most familiar of all, using the word trust makes us ask questions like, “Do we trust in Jesus? Do we trust that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son?” How you

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPOgvzVOQig>

² Skinner, Matt. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/love-among-the-ruins>
Accessed March 13, 2021.

answer questions may help you navigate where you are in your faith. It is not that we don't have questions. Questions don't negate trust, nor do questions detract from belief. It is through questioning that we come to more deeply understand what John is talking about.

We are so quick to pull out the words of John 3:16 that we don't realize what comes before and what follows these words. When I talk about questioning, this verse is in response to many questions that a man by the name of Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews, was asking Jesus when he visited Jesus under cover of night. The verses that follow are a pretty challenging response as well. I share these words of scripture again, but I will read them from Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*.

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

¹⁹⁻²¹ “This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.”³

In the most basic form, the question that this scripture asks is, “Do you want to have a relationship with God?” It is through Jesus Christ that you can trust that God wants a relationship with you. You can trust God's divine love. You can believe in a God who acts out of love rather than having other motivations.

Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension were the means by which God has made a way for our broken relationships to be repaired, for us to experience and live into the reality that you are loved, everyone is loved. The person you like to judge and criticize and are at odds with, well God loves. God loves those you despise, those you think have no value. God loves those who hurt others, those with power, and especially those with no power.

³ [The Message \(MSG\)](#) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

And because God loves all of those, you can trust – you can believe – that God loves you. Not because you are so much better than others, not because you are a good Christian, not because of anything you do or don't do, but simply because you are a child of God and you are valuable. God loves you.

Do you trust in this God who so loved the world that “He gave his Son, his one and only Son...so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life? Regardless of how you answer that, you can believe that God loves you and that you can live into this reality.

Trust and believe in the name of the only Son of God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Generous and gracious God,
with your great mercy, you have made us alive together with Christ.
By your grace we are saved from sin and despair,
and promised hope for everlasting life with you.
You have shown us immeasurable riches through your grace and mercy,
and we offer you our deepest gratitude, now and always.
We pray that each person will know the fullness of your gifts
in ways that touch their deepest needs.

We pray for those dear to us
and all those we've come to lean on in the months of the pandemic...
We pray for those who are struggling in isolation or frustration...
for all those who experience illness or pain in body, mind or spirit...
for all who have lost someone or something central to their lives
and have to cope with grief and loss...
May all these, your children, know your grace and mercy.

We pray for peace and safety in the world...
for countries struggling to care for their citizens and to rebuild their economies...
for all who do not receive the respect and consideration they deserve...
for all those persecuted for their faith or their views...
for all who are disenfranchised and long to live in freedom...
May all these, your children, know your grace and mercy.

We pray for your church around the world and for the congregations we know...
for the work of presbyteries across Canada and the faithful ministries they lead in
this time of working at a distance...
for the learning we have gained in outreach during the pandemic and all who have
connected to your church in new ways...

and for ministers and other leaders who are finding this time of planning and decision making very stressful...

May your church in all its many expressions know your grace and mercy.

We pray for the concerns on our hearts this day,

for the fears and frustrations we struggle with...

for any troubled relationships...

for the doubts and the hopes which compete within us...

for any need of healing and support...

May we, your children, know your grace and mercy.

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We offer the prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray, saying:

Lord's Prayer

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 from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

The season of Lent leads us on, closer and closer to the Cross. As we contemplate Jesus lifted up on the Cross for our sakes, consider what the gift of his mercy and grace means for you. There are people from different churches and places following this service, as you present your offering to God this day to your church community, let your offering express your thanksgiving for such an amazing gift from God.

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If you would like to learn more about First Presbyterian, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of First Presbyterian Church in Thunder Bay, visit our website at <https://fpresbyterian.ca> for more information.

Hymn

Light of the minds that know him

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1. Light of the minds that know him, may Christ be light to mine!
My sun in risen splendour, my light of truth divine,
my guide in doubt and darkness, my true and living way,
my clear light ever shining, my dawn of heaven's day.
2. Life of the souls that love him, may Christ be ours indeed!
The living bread from heaven on whom our spirits feed,
Who died for love of sinners to bear our guilty load,
And make of life's brief journey a new Emmaus road.

3. Strength of the wills that serve him, may Christ be strength to me,
Who stilled the storm and tempest, who calmed the tossing sea,
his Spirit's power to move me, his will to master mine,
his cross to carry daily and conquer in his sign.
4. May it be ours to know him that we may truly love,
and loving, fully serve him as serve the saints above,
till in that home of glory with fadeless splendour bright,
we serve in perfect freedom our strength, our life, our light.

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Benediction (based on John 3: 16-17)

Just as God's Word was sent into the world
to heal and redeem,
so God sends you into the world this day
to be light and love, healing and hope.
Go now to be light for the world!
And may the grace and peace of God the Creator,
the Redeemer, and the Sustainer
come upon you this day
and remain with you always. Amen.

— taken from *"O Merciful God: God of Wisdom: Prayers for the Fourth Sunday in Lent,"*
written by Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey and the Rev. Susan A. Blain.
Posted on the United Church of Christ's [Worship Ways](#) website.