

SERVICE FOR USE DURING CONFERENCE MEETING WEEKEND
May 31, 2015

(Many of the elements of this service are the ones that will be used during the Service of Praise at the Annual Meeting of Conference held in Lanigan, Saskatchewan.)

Prelude:

Greeting:

As we gather on this day, may our hearts be opened by the Spirit
To perceive new directions for our lives and our ministry in this place.

May there be fresh winds that blow into our lives.

May the breath of the Holy Presence fill our lungs.

May a fire ignite our very being;

And may a new Pentecost impel us forward.

Opening Prayer:

Spirit of Life, in which we move and breathe and have our being, we give thanks for this day.

We have been blessed boundlessly and generously with the knowledge that, over the past few days we have done the work of the church to the best of our abilities, with the faith, work and energy of our retirees who have given so much of themselves to the church, with the spirit of friendship (new and renewed) in our time together at this Conference meeting.

May our time here this morning be blessed with peace and give us an energy to go forward into our future, whatever that might hold.

May we be the ones who make it so.

A Hymn:

Shadow and Substance (MV 44)

Prayer for Transformation:

Shadow and substance, wonder and mystery, guide us to mystical union in prayer.

(moment of silence)

We are imperfect people trying our best to live with respect and integrity with our brothers and sisters in creation.

We are imperfect people trying our best to have gratitude, compassion and open mindedness.

We are imperfect people trying our best to live with courage and inclusiveness.

We are imperfect people trying our best to live with spirit and joy.

May we know even in our imperfection that when we continue to do our best, we are given the opportunity, the strength and the wisdom to do better.

May we be the ones who make it so.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 7:1-14

(From The Inclusive Bible:)

“Don’t judge, or you yourself will be judged. Your judgment on others will be the judgment you receive. The measure you use will be used to measure you. Why do you look at the splinter in your neighbor’s eye and never see the board in your own eye? How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me remove the splinter in your eye.’ When the whole time there’s a two-by-four in your own? Hypocrite! Remove the board from your own eye first; then you’ll be able to see clearly to remove the splinter from your neighbor’s eyes.

“Don’t give dogs what is sacred; don’t throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they’ll just trample them underfoot – then turn and tear you to pieces.

“Ask and keep asking, and you will receive. Seek and keep seeking, and you will find. Knock and keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who keeps asking, receives. The one who keeps seeking, finds. And the one who keeps knocking, enters.

“Is there any among you who would hand your daughter a stone when she asked for bread? - Would one of you hand your son a snake when he asked for a fish? If you, with all your faults, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Abba God in heaven give good things to those who ask!

“Therefore treat others as you would have them treat you. This is the whole meaning of the Law and the prophets.

“Enter by the narrow gate. The wide gate puts you onto the spacious road to damnation, and many take it. But it’s a small gate, a narrow road that leads to Life, and only a few find it.

Time with the Children

What do you do when you have an important decision or a difficult choice to make? Some people flip a coin and say "If it's heads, I'll do this and if it is tails, I'll do that." I can remember doing that when I was young. If it came up tails and that wasn't what I wanted to do, I'd flip it again and say, "Let's try two out of three." I'd just keep flipping until I got the answer I wanted.

Sometimes people look in the newspaper for something called a horoscope – it's supposed to tell us what we should do based on the stars. It's really pretty ridiculous! Maybe you've had a fortune cookie at a Chinese restaurant. The message inside could probably fit just about any situation. Some people use the "eeney, meeney, miney, moe" method to decide what they will do.

There are a lot of ways that people use to choose what they are going to do, but I don't think they are very good ways to make an important decision. What should we do when we have to make an important decision? We just heard the advice of Jesus in our lesson for this morning. He says we should, "Seek and you will find, ask and it will be given to you, knock and the door will be opened to you."

How do we go about "seeking" and "asking"? The first thing we need to do is to "seek" out advice from someone we know cares about us – We "ask" Mom or Dad, or a grandparent, or a teacher or our minister. These are people who have probably been through something very similar to what you are and they are people we can trust to give us good advice.

Another thing we can do is to talk to God in prayer. Maybe we can even do it with one of the adults that we might ask to help us with our decision. God always hears our prayers, but sometimes we have to have help in understanding God's answer.

So, what should we do when we face important decisions? Seek for the answer by asking for help from someone who loves and cares for us and to talk to God in prayer about what we need to do. Sometimes when we talk to God or to another person about our decisions, we are able to find the answer even as we talk about the problem.

Let's pray: God who loves us, we thank you that there are others who love and care about us, too, and that we can talk to them about our problems and decisions in life. May we always remember to seek out the advice and help of our parents and others who care. Amen.

A Hymn

I'm Gonna Shout, Shout (MV 183)

Reflection:

“The Narrow Door” (A sermon in story form.)

The man came up over the hill and there before him lay the city.

Streams of people seemed to be coming and going through the large gate that was the way almost everyone entered the city. He could not help but think back to what he had heard the young Rabbi say several days before in the small village in Galilee.

“Try to come through the narrow door.” He knew that most private estates had both wide and narrow doors. The wide doors were for general commerce. The narrow door was opened only out of friendship. The wide door was staffed by servants. The narrow door was often opened by the owner of the estate or the owner’s family.

But did a city have a narrow door? He could not remember ever seeing one before. And if there was such a door, who would open it?

The man had wrestled with the words of the young Rabbi for many days. “What did he mean, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door?’” Which narrow door? Whose narrow door?

And yet, the other words the young Rabbi spoke made sense to him. They seemed to fill a void in his life that had existed as long as he could remember. He recalled some of them. “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8) Again, here was the image of the door.

And he remembered most of all when the young Rabbi had said, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

He had first heard this remarkable young teacher on the grassy hillside in Galilee when he happened to come upon the huge crowd that had gathered to hear him preach. His words that day had startled him and he could still close his eyes and it all came back vividly.

"You who are poor are blessed, for the right of God is yours. You who hunger now are blessed, for you'll be filled. You who weep now are blessed, for you'll laugh. You are blessed when people hate you, when they scorn and insult you and spurn your name as evil because of the Chosen One. On the day they do so, rejoice and be glad: your reward will be great in heaven, for their ancestors treated the prophets the same way."

But not all his words were of comfort. His eyes had burned when he said: "But woe to you rich, for you are now receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are full, for you'll go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you'll weep in your grief. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in the same way.

"To you who hear me, I sway: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those you curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well. Give to all who beg from you. When someone takes what is yours, don't demand it back.

"Do to others what you would have them do to you."

And there was more, much more. So much that he could not remember it all. He could remember those eyes, though, eyes that seemed to see right through into your very soul. It was as if the young Rabbi's words were meant for him alone.

And he had given it great thought. More than just thought, he had tried to live by those words.

Just the other day when he had been cheated at the inn, he had decided not to make an issue of it, but instead praised the innkeeper for the fine accommodations and the reasonable prices. Before he had left the inn, the innkeeper had come rushing up to him to tell him of the "mistake" he had made in his account.

And when he had seen, in the village square, a man who had done him a great injustice, he greeted the man with a smile and kind words. Such surprise on the man's face! Such obvious embarrassment! And yet, he sensed some new respect and a hint of a question in his eyes and in his voice.

When he gave the coins to the beggar at the gate of that village, his heart felt warm and the sun seemed to shine a bit brighter.

Perhaps there was something to the words of the young Rabbi.

Now, as he looked down toward the city he noticed another gate, a door in the wall where he had never noticed one before. It was a narrow door, a very narrow door, out of the way, seemingly unused.

"Try to come through the narrow door." Could this be what the young Rabbi meant?

It seemed ridiculous, but the closer he got to the city, the more he wanted to inspect that door. So, as the other pilgrims and travellers walked through the wide main gate into the city, he took his camel and proceeded toward the narrow door. Were people watching him? What were they thinking? Were they laughing at him, knowing something he did not?

They did not seem to notice him at all.

And then he was before the narrow door. What should he do now?

The words came back to him, "Knock, and the door will be opened for you." He knocked.

The door opened. The doorkeeper looked amazingly like the young Rabbi. No words were spoken, but his gesture was one of welcome. He took the reins of his camel and started to go through the door. Then he realized that his camel would not be able to go through.

He quickly decided that he could leave the camel outside the wall as he did not think he would be in the city long. So he unloaded the bags from the back of the camel. He tried to push the first bag through the door. But it was too large.

So, too, was the second bag. He looked expectantly at the doorkeeper.

There was silence for a long time. Then the doorkeeper spoke: "The narrow door demands that one leave all things behind. One cannot come through the narrow

door carrying all of one's attachments to the world. One must leave behind the burden of material things. One must leave behind the burden of opinion and doctrine. One must leave behind the burden of prejudice and the burden of fear. To enter through the narrow door one must strip oneself clean. Not even a knapsack, not a little carrying case, not a purse. The narrow door demands faith and trust alone."

"But how shall I live without the things I carry?" asked the man at the door.

"To live in faith and trust is to find security in God and not in the things of this world," said the doorkeeper. "To live in faith and trust is to be able to put aside such things and to have confidence in the One who has created all things including you."

"But how shall I know what to do, how am I to make my way?" asked the man at the door.

And the answer came: "To enter through the narrow door is an act of faith and trust. It is to know that when one has entered all will be well."

Suddenly, the man noticed that he was not alone. Around the narrow door were many people, all burdened with much baggage. They were wailing and weeping. "Who are these people and why are they carrying on so?" he asked.

"They are the ones who cannot let go of their burdens. They are the ones who cannot divest themselves of their self-centredness. They are the ones who are afraid to let go and who feel the weight of the baggage that they carry - that baggage is fear and that baggage is riches. They want to enter, but they will not with all that they carry. As that will not fit, they cannot enter through the narrow door - the door of life.

"See, over there," he pointed, "there is a rich young man who sought the way to life; but he could not give up the luxuries he enjoyed. He could not give up the silks and the satins, the gold and the jewels. He also could not give up the power he exercised over others. He could not give himself over to the One who gave him life, light and love. And so he weeps and wails and gnashes his teeth outside the narrow door."

"Can't they change their minds? Wouldn't they rather give up what they have instead of weeping and wailing?" asked the man.

"They are welcome at any time," said the doorkeeper. "However, the longer they weep and wail the tighter they hold onto their possessions. It is almost as if the longer they wait, the more they want to hold on to them. They seem to have forgotten why they sought the narrow door in the first place."

"But why should I want to give up all that I have to enter? What will I find on the other side?" the man at the door asked.

"The narrow door is the door, the gate, to life - true life, everlasting life, life in the spirit and mystery of God. To enter one must have faith and trust that does not question what lies on the other side, but faith and trust that knows that the One who is Love will not give anything that is not good.

"And now you must decide whether you will come in or whether you will join the others who weep and wail here, outside the door," said the doorkeeper.

The man looked about him. Surely there must be a better way than what he could see here. Certainly what lay on the other side of the door would be far better than this.

And yet, he *was* afraid. He did not want to give up control over his own life.

Then he looked around again. He thought of the emptiness he had been feeling his life. The emptiness that seemed to go away when he met the young Rabbi, the one who looked so much like this keeper of the narrow door.

What would he be giving up? Did he really think it would be best to join those weeping and wailing outside the door?

At once he knew what he must do. He put down the bag he was carrying. He gave his camel and his goods to a poor man who was walking by. He even gave him the small bag of coins which he carried on his belt.

Then he turned to the narrow door and walked through. The keeper of the door spoke again, "Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for

you from the creation of the world. Well done, you are a good and faithful worker. Come, share my joy."

And as the door silently closed behind him he saw before him a banquet table. Around the table were people from all over the world. They were smiling and laughing and enjoying the bounty of the table. There were some at the head of the table who looked as if they had never had anything in the world. They looked like the beggars at the gates - the side gates - of the city.

Everyone was enjoying the banquet and everyone was part of the activity around the table. No one was alone. No one was left out. All cared about one another. It was a banquet of joy. It was a celebration of peace. It was the most wonderful and beautiful sight he had ever seen.

Amen - So May It Be.

A Hymn

Deep in Our Hearts (MV 154)

Offering: May the Spirit open our hearts as we give with joy and generosity for the work of the wider Church in our midst and far away.

The Gifts For and Of God Are Gathered:

Dedication of Offering:

May our giving shine light in the darkness so that we and our world may know the good that is all around us in the creation and in one another. In the name of Jesus we pray and may we be the ones who make it so.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and intercession

As we seek to draw ever deeper into the Mystery of the Presence of the Holy, our prayers will contain times of silence in which we may offer our own prayers on the various themes in our hearts.

Let us remember those who suffer from illness,
from the pain of memory,
from torture, from victimization,
especially those hurt by the church or its members

Let us prayer for those who are outcast,

or in prison, or oppressed

Let us pray for those who are hungry, or homeless, or poor,
and those who are unemployed, or exploited

Let us prayer for the coming of justice in the world,
and for peace that is a just reconciliation . . .

Let us pray for the earth on which we walk
and to which we will one day return;
offering what we have and receiving what we need
of the earth's beauty

Let us pray for the Annual Meeting of Saskatchewan Conference
that the work that has been done is for the good of all the
church and the mission of Jesus the Christ.. . . .

And let us offer our own petitions,
trusting in God's wisdom and compassion

God hears the prayers of the faithful,
and in the security and joy of Love we find safe harbour and understanding.

May we be the ones who follow the path we have been shown and make it so for all the
world..

A Hymn

Draw the Circle Wide (MV 145)

Commissioning and Blessing:

Go out into the world in peace. Be strong and of good courage. Hold fast
to that which is good. Love and serve God rejoicing in the freedom given
to you in Jesus the Christ.

And as we go from this place:

**We go, knowing we are held in the arms of God with the graceful love
of a mother and the tender strength of a father;**

We go, knowing we are not alone, but in the company of Jesus the Christ;

**We go, knowing we are affirmed and upheld in all we do by the
Comforter, the Holy Spirit;**

We go, in this knowledge and with this blessing, to love and serve others
in the name of God.

And may we be the ones who make it so.

Musical Postlude

This service and message was prepared by John Haas, President-Elect of Conference. Work on the liturgy for the Service of Praise also included President of Conference Gayle Wensley; Conference Executive Secretary Bill Doyle and Rev. Lorraine Harkness.

This year's Service of Praise was constructed to be a "non-theistic" service – that is, one in which God is not perceived as a "being out there somewhere", but rather as spirit or energy intimately woven in and through all of creation.

The hymns are taken from More Voices, but substitutions may be made depending on the resources of the community.