

New St. James Presbyterian Church
September 20, 2020
Presbyterians Sharing Sunday
Rev. Mark McLennan

“TEAR DOWN THE FENCES”

SCRIPTURES:

Exodus 16:2–7

Exodus 16: 9-15

Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16

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Inequality in the workplace is an all too common complaint in our world.

It surfaces in arguments about minimum wage, and is expressed in a multitude of ways across the country and around the world.

Those who pretend to understand economics talk about supply and demand, and use presentations with lots of charts and graphs in an attempt to explain why the world is divided into those who have much, and those who have little.

But explanations don't feed a family, or give a labourer a sense of purpose or accomplishment.

Jesus used parables to describe the indescribable.

These well-worn stories are portraits of the character of God, and signposts that point to God's coming reign of justice and peace.

They not only describe the indescribable – they also describe the unimaginable for us, living as we do by our own wits.

Whatever dream God had for Creation, we have made a world

- where effort is rewarded;
- where the weak know that their only defense is to be stronger.

In this world, justice is not always just, and generosity is a rare gift, found occasionally among equals and less often across the boundaries of wealth, power and privilege.

So when Jesus offers a parable, he speaks **against** our habits; **against** our common knowledge.

He invites us to consider an alternative that is **God's** desire for creation, and **God's** promised hope for humanity.

In today's parable, Jesus tells of a landowner who is looking for people to work in his vineyard.

At the beginning of the day, he finds some labourers, agrees what to pay them, and then sends them to work.

He does the same thing at nine, noon, three and five o'clock and each time he finds people who haven't been hired yet.

He tells them “*You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.*”

This could be a trick - an appeal to those still without work at the end of the day to see how desperate they are.

But this is a parable, and we are surprised at the end when those who began work at the end of the day receive the same wage as those who began first thing in the morning.

Naturally, those who worked all day in the scorching sun begin to grumble
– *why should those who worked only an hour get paid the same?*

But the landowner says he paid them what they agreed – why should it matter that he paid the last people the same?

Have you seen the cartoon that shows the difference between justice and equality?

Three people are trying to watch a ball game through a fence.

Each is a different height.

In the first scene, each person stands on a step that is the same height.

This is equality – each had the same size step, but only the tallest person was able to see over the fence.

In the next scene, each person stands on a step of a size that best suits them.

And each can see over the fence. This is justice.

But Jesus’ parable goes beyond justice:

God tears the fence down, offering love and grace and justice for all.

Through this parable, Jesus pulls back the curtain to see what is possible, what is desirable and what is longed for by God.

The beauty of the gospel - the treasure that is Christ risen - is that God’s power eliminates the barriers we would use to organize the world.

Work and rest are distinct from one another, guarded by rules and restrictions.

Life and death are separate and always in tension.

But when we see the work of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see those human boundaries are ignored.

In God’s world,
 hope is offered against expectation;
 the ‘least of these’ are considered equally;
 tears are turned into laughter;
 the blind given sight.

These things shouldn’t happen - except that God disdains our ordering of God’s creation.

That all the workers receive the same wage for different hours worked seems to be a travesty of justice.

But it is, in fact, a re-definition of justice and a reminder that God's justice is first and foremost the embodiment of God's generous grace.

As those who have declared themselves followers of Jesus, we in the Presbyterian Church in Canada are on a path, not just to discover the new thing that God has done through Jesus Christ, but to embody God's hope, God's love, and God's abundant life - **in our lives**.

That is the impulse behind our worship, and the mission projects that grace our communities and enhance the lives of neighbours and strangers among us.

As a denomination, one way we express our desire to follow Jesus is through our support of **Presbyterians Sharing**.

It is our attempt as Presbyterian congregations to bring Jesus' parable to life

- to live the grace that we have experienced in Jesus,
- and to share that grace as widely as possible.

When Presbyterians from across Canada join together to share in mission and ministry through **Presbyterians Sharing**, we are collectively putting our faith into action – across Canada and around the world.

We are working to create a world according to God's vision – where all have equal access to God's love and grace.

By pooling our resources, we support leaders, create resources, and connect together to do things we couldn't do on our own.

Together we are able to proclaim a message of God's hope through our actions.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Supporting congregations

Congregations across Canada share the gospel in word and action – vibrant expressions of God's love. Congregations helping congregations is at the core of Presbyterians Sharing.

Together, we are equipping congregations, ministries, and presbyteries by providing materials and resources for faithful ministry, supporting theological education, encouraging visionary leaders, supporting mentorship, and providing grants to start new congregations and renew established ones.

And it is working.

Congregations are stepping out of their comfort zones to try new things and witness to the resurrection of Christ in new ways.

Members from St. Luke's Church, Bathurst, New Brunswick, where we are supporting renewal through a regional ministry say,
"Working together in service for others has strengthened our faith as we support each other and the wider community."

There is great power in prayer.

We thank God for all who have encouraged us in our journey of faith.”

The Rev. Deb Rapport participated in a mentoring program to support her leadership in Toronto’s ARISE Ministry which provides outreach and pastoral care to human trafficking victims and people involved in the sex trade.

She shares, “I have grown and strengthened my leadership capabilities through this process. I have been blessed and encouraged by the coaching, guidance and wisdom of my mentor.”

Offering hope

Another way we help live out God’s vision of abundant life through Presbyterians Sharing is by supporting ministries in Canada that reach out to some of Canada’s most vulnerable people: refugees, Indigenous communities, and inner-city communities.

These include ministries like Tyndale St.-Georges and Action Réfugiés in Montréal, ARISE Ministry in Toronto and seven ministries serving primarily Indigenous people, including Kenora Fellowship Centre, Winnipeg Inner City Missions, Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry and Hummingbird Ministry in BC.

You don’t have to look very far to see and hear stories of the tragic legacy of the Indian residential schools.

SUSAN – HEALING AND RECONCILIATION TOUR

At Birdtail Sioux First Nation, site of the Birtle residential school, Doug Hanska thanked the visitors with an honour song.

He explains,

“The stop they did in Birdtail, I know it may not mean much to a lot of people, but to some of us it means a lot,” he said.

“We can forgive and move on, like our teachings tell us.”

Lynn Vissers, a member of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in King City, Ontario, and participant on the tour shared,

“The journey has only just begun for me.

This will be a long journey of building relationships.

I hope that I can help light a passion in others for the work that needs to be done in restoring relationships of dignity, kindness, and love for our Indigenous sisters and brothers.”

Supporting international mission partners

But our efforts at tearing down fences don’t stop in Canada.

In a broken world desperate for God’s vision of grace and justice, our gifts to **Presbyterians Sharing** support international mission partners by sending mission staff and short-term volunteers and providing grants.

Dr. Blair Bernard and his family just returned from Malawi. Steve McInnis and Nora Martin from Woodstock – also just returned from Malawi.

In the Middle East – probably one of the hardest places to be a Christian –

Presbyterians Sharing supports the Near East School of Theology as they equip Christian leaders to serve congregations there and maintain a Christian witness of peace in the turbulent countries of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories.

These are just glimpses into some of the ways gifts to Presbyterians Sharing are making a difference in the lives of thousands of people – across Canada and around the world.

We have not perfectly learned the lessons of Jesus.

Our efforts at grace are still marked by our human impulse to manage, and to control.

We are still ruled by historical definitions of justice and equality - rooted in what we call fairness – and we forget that God in Christ has eliminated human boundaries, knocked down the fences and opened us to infinite possibilities in God's generous grace.

We might be tempted, as those in the parable were tempted, to resent such generosity. But led by the Spirit, perhaps we can be inspired by it.

By our witness, through our participation in the many projects supported by Presbyterians Sharing, may we be tempted to a broader experience of God's generosity.

And may we see God's reign of justice and peace brought closer to all.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND SPIRIT...AMEN.

Call to Worship

One: We are here because God's Spirit calls us to worship.

All: We are here to offer our praise and thanksgiving for God's presence in our lives.

One: We are here to acknowledge God's love all around us.

All: We are here to claim the promise that wherever we are, God is with us.

One: God is among us as we praise, pray, love, and serve

All: God is here! Let us worship God!

PRAYER OF APPROACH

God of desert days and wilderness nights, we rest in the comfort of your presence and trust in the sustaining power of your love.

We come to you today, seeking the help and hope that comes only from you.

We long to be fed and nourished by your Word.

We want to be filled with your Spirit of peace and joy.

We ask only that you will provide us with all that we need to live abundantly and to serve with abandon.

O God, we stand at the brink of what has been and what is yet to be.

We long to receive the gift of your liberation and to taste the sweetness of your promises.

But the way forward is unknown, and so we hesitate: discouraged, frightened, insecure, complaining.

Still, we know we must move ahead on our journey.

Make us mindful of your sustaining presence and, like a bird in full flight, may this assurance soar within our faith so we can rise above the challenges of this moment and follow you together in faith and obedience.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

God rains down manna in the wilderness and squeezes water from a rock.

With fire and cloud God leads us out of the bondage of our past
into a future of freedom and safety.

God has been with us in the past, is with us in this present moment,
and will be with us forever and ever.

Thanks be to God.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

This is a difficult time for us, God, a difficult year that is marked by disappointment, loss, loneliness, and fear. We long for things to go back to normal, or at least to know how long this pandemic will last, but you ask us to be patient and to hold on.

We remember that we're not alone in our struggle. We remember that we belong to a congregation, to a presbytery, to a denomination, and to the One Church throughout the world that is enduring all these things together.

Indeed, we share the struggle of the whole world in these days, and we remember that many others are suffering disproportionately more than we are.

We pray for people who are homeless, for refugees and for those who are struggling to meet their basic needs and care for their families.

We pray for people whose homes are not safe places to shelter, either because they are poorly equipped or because of domestic abuse or violence.

We pray for Indigenous peoples and others whose circumstances have made this pandemic particularly difficult.

We pray for people in long-term care facilities who are so isolated and at greater risk of illness and death.

We pray for those among us and beyond our community who have lost income, whose businesses are struggling, whose meagre savings are in jeopardy.

We pray for those who are sick and for the loved ones of those who have tragically died.

Give us faith, O God, not only to endure through difficult times, but to respond to your call to work in your vineyard even now, sharing from our resources of time, talent, and treasure as we participate in Christ's mission in the world. May your Spirit give us everything we need so that together we can be people of love, care, generosity, and hospitality for those who so desperately need to experience your presence and catch a glimpse of your hope in their lives.

We pray for The Presbyterian Church in Canada, for each congregation, ministry, and mission. Give each one a sense of purpose and bless them with creativity, wisdom, love, and all the resources they need to reach out in Jesus' name.

Bless us together, as a denomination, and make us one in faith, hope, and love. Teach us to respect our differences and to pray for one another as siblings in Christ. Bind us together in our shared faith and grow our friendship and unity with one another and with other churches.

We pray for the mission and ministries that we do together through *Presbyterians Sharing*.

We pray for regional and national staff, committees and volunteers who work carefully to support congregations, presbyteries, and synods in these difficult days. Give them wisdom and energy to do the tasks set before them.

We pray for international mission staff and partners around the world who are sharing the good news of God's kingdom of love and justice.

We remember the Indigenous ministries of our church across Canada, and pray for their leaders and members, especially in light of the severe impact of the pandemic on many communities.

We pray that the healing and reconciliation work of our church will help build good relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Bless those who are speaking out for the voiceless and seeking justice. We pray for wisdom in their words and that their messages will be heard with open ears.

We pray for the students, faculty and staff of Knox College, Presbyterian College, St. Andrew's Hall, and Vancouver School of Theology. We pray that you will work through the colleges and teachers to help equip the church in an ever-changing world.

Gracious God, pour out your blessing on this congregation too, that we may be encouraged and equipped to be the church today and, in the days ahead.

Give us faith to embody Christ's loving presence in our families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and everywhere that your children are suffering or in need.

We pray in trust that God loves us, in faith that the Spirit hears us and knows our needs, and in hope of the coming kingdom that Jesus promised. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP QUOTE

The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children.

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), German Lutheran pastor, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident

BENEDICTION

Beloved, let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.

Love the Lord and serve others for the glory of God.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all now and forever. Amen.