

SUNDAY, September 15, 2024 "Love and Good Deeds"

Hebrews 10: 19-26 Ephesians 2:8-10 Mark 8:27-38

It is great to welcome everyone here this morning on this Back to Church Sunday. However you found us- whether this is your first time or whether you've been here many times before, or maybe you found out about us via [findachurchnow.com](http://findachurchnow.com) and are connecting with us online-- welcome! Back to church Sunday is an international initiative an intentional effort to reach out and invite our friends and neighbours to come see what church is about. We are gathered in the presence of God our Creator, to learn about Jesus our Saviour and to experience the Spirit moving amongst us. Like many people present today we are all searching for something outside of ourselves and investigating possibilities for our future lives. What we are searching for is something we each need-- hope.

This hope comes to us in various ways and means because each of us is a child of God who although created in His image we are different and unique beings, given the gift of mind, heart and soul. We are creatures that are not one dimensional but filled with the yearning that there is something greater than all of us put together and this God!

As a church we believe in God who created us, in Jesus His Son who died and rose again and in the Spirit which moves amongst us even now. But we also gather together for the purpose of living and loving others as we journey together in this life. As a church we share in celebrations which focus on our life's journey. Like love- when people find love and want to share it with another person. Or death- when people grieve as our church family is right now with the death of a couple Omer and Marilyn; or when people come together and celebrate becoming a part of God's family through what is known as sacraments or holy moments are experienced. That is through the waters of Baptism and the sharing in Holy Communion as we do what Jesus asked us to do in Remembrance of Him.

Our purpose is share the hope and love that Jesus church brings to the world. The church has played a significant role in society and contributed to some of the most amazing developments the world has ever seen. It is in the name of Jesus and His church, that education, health care, food banks, homeless shelters, youth support programs and assisting many people with different kinds of addictions community has been built up and established. The church has also been in the forefront of human rights and social justice or even what became known as the social gospel in the early days of the United Church. The Spirit of God is

what moves all people unique and diverse people that we are to be the church of today and to look to the future tomorrow. So welcome back to church!

In our reading from Mark 8 Jesus asks his disciples a simple question. "Who do the people say I am?" We might ask it this way-- what is the word on the street about that Jesus guy? What have you heard? What do you know? It is interesting what they answer: some say John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. John the Baptist was the one God sent to prepare the way of the Lord's coming. John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin and lived out in the wilderness where people would come to him and hear the message that the promised messiah would soon come one 'whose sandals I am unworthy to untie'. A very humbling way of putting that he would not be able to be his servants whose job it was to untie sandals of dirty feet.

Elijah was a beloved prophet of the Old Testament who defended the worship of the Hebrew God over that of the Canaanite deity Baal. And it is through Elijah that God performed many miracles including resurrection, bringing fire down from the sky, and ascending to heaven alive. The disciples also said that Jesus was 'one of the prophets'-- a very general or broad answer, but someone with a connection to God in some form or other that is, someone learned about God and what was to come.

Then Jesus asked them, Who do you say that I am? How would you answer this question? Jesus represented kindness on earth, cared for others more than himself and was selfless. He was God's chosen leader for a specific task of showing us how to live and love others. He was the Chosen one who would die for the sake of others = he was the Saviour. And as Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah'. Jesus then tells the disciples not to tell others about him.

Following this discussion, Jesus then foretells his death and resurrection. He then teaches them that the cost of following Jesus is taking up the cross and following him- his teachings and to what would occur. But there is good news in this-- because Jesus dies and rises to new life through the gift of God's grace.

Grace is a difficult concept-- yes it is amazing but cannot fully articulate its meaning. Max Lucado states, "It is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off." (Grace- more than we deserve). But it is this gift that calls us to love others and do good. It is this gift from God that pushes us into learning and having a new perspective of what we do, not just what we think should do, or ought to do.. But what we need to do.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians (2:8-10) we read that it is by grace that Christ saves us and we will experience eternal life with him. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, not because of something we do but because God gives us this gift. It is by faith alone. Yes we can grow our inner selves by doing good things-- this is what the Christian church exemplifies daily and often what is seen by the secular world, but it all begins with faith in Christ. For He is the one who teaches us to love others and then in and through love to help others.

O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) wrote a short story "The Last Leaf" which is the story of two young women and an elderly man, all artists who live in the same apartment building in New York. One of the women becomes ill and spends her time looking out the window at a vine growing on the wall of an adjacent building. As winter approaches her illness worsens and she becomes depressed. She tells her friends that when the last leaf falls from the vine she fears she will die. The days become shorter, the temperature drops, and the winds blow until there is only one leaf left. That leaf clings tenaciously to the vine and the woman taking hope from that fact, begins to recover. However, the old man himself becomes ill and dies. He dies of the pneumonia he contracted on the cold winter's night when he went out to paint a leaf on the wall where the last leaf had fallen.

This is a story about the willingness to give one's self without counting the cost, putting another's need before one's own and if necessary even risking oneself to help others. There is often a price involved, it may not cost us our life, but the payoff is so much greater. We don't need to be leaf-painters, but what is needed most is in simple actions- a touch, a word, spending time with another person and these often give us enough to bring a ray of light into someone's darkness, and hope. And isn't this what we are all seeking?

Hebrews 10 calls us to hold on to hope because God is faithful. We are to provoke others to love and good deeds and to encourage one another. For we know that in Christ there is hope. Even when we are saddened by the death of loved ones in our church family; even when we might wonder about Jesus in our lives right now or even when we might ask, "Who is Jesus to me? How do I know him? "

Being a part of a church family enables us to put pieces together- pieces of a puzzle that sometimes has no solution on earth. Yet a puzzle nonetheless because the pieces are all within our grasp and it is God's grace that brings them together. By our sharing love and acting in faith and painting the leaf for another, the puzzle of who Jesus is becomes clearer. We are the church because of and through Christ. We are the church and are made stronger through each

other's gifts, talents and experiences. We are the church because God has called us to be here and we are searching for the hope found in Christ alone. But we need to have faith and believe, that with Christ in us, we are able to do all things including love and good deeds.

Let us pray

God of grace and love, hear our prayers as we seek your presence in our lives.

Help us to be reassured that you are our hope and that one day we will be with you and experiencing your glory. Hear us O God as we love you and are grateful for our church family.

In life, in death in life beyond death, we are grateful God you are here. SILENCE. Amen.