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| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **A time for doing – a time for being. 19th July 2020** |
| Welcome to this time of peace; may we find some moments of quiet contemplation.  Welcome to this time of celebration; may our hearts be grateful for the gift of life. Welcome to this time of sacred love; may we gently hold all that is broken here. Welcome to this time of inquiry; here, may we be challenged to open our minds and hearts. Come into this time of community; may we draw the circle of love and justice ever wider. Welcome to this sacred time; let us worship, celebrate, grieve, and love together. |
| Spirit of Life and Love, We have come here to find time to sit quietly with who we are, where we are, and the challenges this world is facing us with.  We come to give thanks for the many blessings that fill our lives – food, warmth and shelter, music and art, the plants and animals that bring us both nourishment and joy, and the support and compassion given to us by those around us. And we come to seek the calm that comes with the knowledge that we are not alone through the trials of life, but have people walking alongside us to share the journey.  There will be people carrying the pain of loss – the fear of uncertainty – the frustration of limitations. There will also be people carrying the joy of relationships, the excitement of new adventures, the contentment of safe harbours in an otherwise turbulent world. The time we share here is a sacred time, – it is made so by our willingness to accept each other for who and what we are, with all our flaws and failings, and with all our many different experiences, and beliefs, and understandings.  And finally we come here to worship - give the honour of worth – to that which we give highest value – God, Love, Peace, Compassion, whatever name we may give it.  May all who come here find their hurts comforted, their joys multiplied, and their spirits strengthened, through the love found here in this sacred space.  And I invite you to join in, or just listen, as I sing Spirit of Life.  Spirit of Life, come unto me,  Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,  Move in the hand giving life the shape of justice.  Roots hold me close, wings set me free.  Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me. |
| **Story – The Devil’s Apprentices, as told by Margaret Silf**  For the record this is fable – a moral story – belief in God or the devil is not required to understand the message!  It was the start of a new term in hell, and the devil was giving an induction course to the latest batch of apprentices.  “There’s no room for complacency”, he warned them. “You wouldn’t believe the half of what’s going on down on earth. People are getting more and more in touch with God. They are starting to see God in creation, and even in each other’s hearts, urgh! They are noticing God’s action in the stories of their own lives. And worse than that, they are starting to realise how important it is to work for justice and for peace. If things carry on like this, God’s kingdom will come, and we’ll all be out of a job.”  There was a long silence, as the seriousness of the devil’s message sank in. The apprentices waited to hear what wisdom the devil would give them for dealing with this perilous situation down on earth. But the Devil decided to test them, and turned the whole problem over to them.  “So what are you going to do about it”, he asked them. “Any bright ideas?”  They scratched their heads and furrowed their brows.  “Come on”, urged the devil. “I’m waiting. We don’t have forever, you know!”  Then tentatively, the first apprentice raised his arm. “Sir”, he ventured, “why don’t we go down and tell them there’s no God?”  “Sorry to disappoint you”, the devil said. “But that wouldn’t wash at all. They seem to be born with something deep in their hearts that attracts them back to God. They often can’t name it, or even admit that it is there, but sooner or later they all have a moment when they know that God exists. You’ll have to come up with a better idea than that.”  Crestfallen, the first apprentice sat down, and the next apprentice raised his arm.  “Sir”, he suggested, “could we perhaps go down there and tell them that there is no such thing as sin, and so they have nothing to fear. Hell is just a myth?”  “A good try”, said the devil, “but unfortunately, the same bit of God that is deep in their hearts also tells them when they are going off course. They know – if they stop to listen to that inner voice – that it is all too possible to commit sin, and they know that when they do, they can feel so terrible afterwards, until they have put things right again. Deep in their hearts, they know what sin is and how hell feels. Think again. What about you”, he said turning to the third apprentice, “what have you got to say for yourself?”  “Well”, replied the third apprentice, slowly and thoughtfully. “I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. You say that it’s no good us telling them that there is no God and it’s no use our telling them that there is no sin. How would it be if we told them that there is no hurry?”  The devil was delighted. “Brilliant”, he squealed. “That’s exactly what we’ll do. You’ll go far, young demon, well done!”  And so it came to be that the human race carried on believing in God and knowing about sin, but never doing much about it, because, after all, there was no hurry. |
| **Reading – It Matters, by Rev. Robert Walsh**  I knew a man who had printed on his stationery this proverb: “Nothing is settled. Everything matters.” It established a certain ambience for reading his letters, as if to say: what you are about to read is to be taken seriously, but is not final. I remember him and his proverb sometimes, especially when it seems impossible to change the world or myself in any significant way.  “Sorry, Jim,” I say. “It’s not true that nothing is settled. In the past year choices have been made, losses have been suffered, there have been growth and decay, there have been commitments and betrayals. None of that can be undone. A year ago no one knew whether during this year one person would become pregnant, another would get cancer, another would take a new job, another would have an accident, but now it is settled.  “One day this year I was present just when someone needed me; another day I was busy doing something else when I was needed. One day I said something to a friend that injured our relationship; another day I said something that enabled a person to see life in a new way. The best and the worst of those days is now written. All my tears, of joy or sorrow, cannot erase it.”  If I stay with my meditation long enough, the reply comes. “Robbie,” says Jim. “You have misunderstood the proverb. It is true you cannot escape the consequences of your actions or the chances of the world. But what is not settled is how the story turns out. What is not settled is what the meaning of your life will be.”  The meaning of a life is not contained within one act, or one day, or one year. As long as you are alive the story of your life is still being told, and the meaning is still open. As long as there is life in the world, the story of the world is still being told. What is done is done, but nothing is settled. And if nothing is settled, then everything matters. Every choice, every act in the new year matters. Every word, every deed is making the meaning of your life and telling the story of the world. Everything matters in the year coming, and, more importantly, everything matters today.  As Leo Tolstoy said, “Remember that there is only one important time and it is Now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person with whom you are, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future. The most important pursuit is making that person, the one standing at you side, happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life." |
| **Prayer**  Spirit of Life, we know that each one of us is being carried along in time’s ever-rolling stream. Nothing we can do will stem its flow.  Sometimes we panic as we are swept into the rapids, or feel ourselves to be out of our depth, or near to sinking with exhaustion. At such times, help us to know that what to us is the angry swirl and flood of time, is in reality a refreshing river, that safely bears us up, that cleanses, reinvigorates, makes possible countless new scenes and beginnings in our lives, a river that brings us always nearer home. So we give thanks for the experience of time, the refreshing river.  Some of us find that we haven’t enough time. We do so much that often we say we haven’t any time. Save us from being so busy that we have no time for rest, for quietness and unhurried enjoyments.  We give thanks when we leave behind the business to enjoy times of peace and simplicity; for sitting in the sun, for an unhurried talk with a friend, for enjoyment of music and thought, for the quiet contemplation of something beautiful and good. Save us from saying we have no time when someone in need comes to us, asking for our help and attention.  Some of us find we have too much time. Time hangs heavily on our hands. We can no longer do many of the things we once enjoyed. We have retired from work, or cannot find work, or have not the energy we once had, or illness has left us unable to do all that we once did. Help us not to waste time in vain regret. Make us know that the stream of life makes all things new, and brings us fresh opportunities, new interests, new attitudes, new people. Make us know that we always have time to appreciate beauty and relieve suffering, even if it be just by our thought and our prayers.  So let us take this moment of time, now, to whisper our prayers for our world. Let us bring our joy and anticipation, our worries and concerns, and offer them to our God, whoever and whatever our God might be. Let us be silent, together, now.  May all our prayers be heard and acknowledged, and may our hearts be eased by this time together. Amen |
| **Reflection – A time for doing, a time for being**  "Say, Pooh, why aren't you busy?" I said. "Because it's a nice day," said Pooh. "Yes, but ---" "Why ruin it?" he said. "But you could be doing something Important," I said. "I am, " said Pooh. "Oh? Doing what?" "Listening," he said. "Listening to what?" "To the birds. And that squirrel over there." "What are they saying?" I asked. "That it's a nice day," said Pooh. "But you know that already," I said. "Yes, but it's always good to hear that somebody else thinks so, too," he replied.  You can always rely on Winnie the Pooh for a word or two of wisdom. Stop and smell the roses, goes the phrase. Or Jan Taddeo has some lovely advice, in her reflection “Three Things”, where she writes:  Here's an adage I've always liked: Don't just do something, stand there. Stand in the surf, or sit on a rock, or lay your body across the earthy loam…and be quiet. Very quiet.  Do you hear it? That still small voice, the echo of your soul, reverberating with the call to your own true self to emerge.  Then the calm within becomes the calm without. The storm blows over, the sun recovers its position of strength, And that glorious symbol of hope and unity emerges across the sky.  At the end of this rainbow, a treasure… the three things you must do:  Go outside yourself and know the needs of the world.  Go within and discover your Life-given gifts.  Then arch yourself like a rainbow bridge between the two and create a more beautiful world.  It’s a beautiful thought – creating a more beautiful world by standing still. But I know how hard it is to just stand there – I suspect all of us do. It is ridiculously difficult. My brain is constantly trying to start up conversations about things I really needed to have done already, and things I need to do tomorrow. I know I am my own worst enemy in that regard – if my to do list isn’t at least an A4 page of small writing I worry about what I’ve forgotten. I need to learn the skill of Winnie’s the Pooh’s listening, being in the now, and just – well, just being.  It’s something I think is vital in this day and age, simply for the sake of sanity, but also for the sake of our souls. That teaching in our second reading – that what is most important is what – and who - is in front of us at that time – despite the fact that we will be always aware of the next deadline, or appointment, or chore that wants to claim our attention away from the person we are with. It can feel very risky –I’ve had times when what I’d anticipated would be a short meeting turned into a three hour encounter, because of the need of the other person to talk, to unburden themselves. And sometimes I’ll experience that niggle that says I really need to end this conversation, I’ve got other stuff I need to be doing. But then I remind myself that actually nothing is more important than the person I am with right then – the phone can wait, the sermon can go hang – this person is the centre of my universe right now.  But that reading by Rev Robert Walsh can actually be read two ways, I think. There is the way that Winnie the Pooh would approve, that Leo Tolstoy taught – that this very moment matters more than anything else, and that just being present to that moment is all that you need to do. But when I read that reflection there’s a sense of urgency behind it. Let me read one of the paragraphs again – Jim talking to Robbie -  The meaning of a life is not contained within one act, or one day, or one year. As long as you are alive the story of your life is still being told, and the meaning is still open. As long as there is life in the world, the story of the world is still being told. What is done is done, but nothing is settled. And if nothing is settled, then everything matters. Every choice, every act in the new year matters. Every word, every deed is making the meaning of your life and telling the story of the world. Everything matters in the year coming, and, more importantly, everything matters today.  Nothing is settled. The devil’s apprentice suggested that the devil should tell people that there was no hurry – yes there’s important stuff, but you know what, it can wait a bit, it’s all right. It will still all be there tomorrow, take today off, why don’t you. And when you look at society today, you’d think the story was true – yes, we’re facing catastrophic climate change, but it’s ok, that’s not coming just yet, we can build another run way, widen another motorway, build more cars, keep dumping plastic, open up the coal plants again – no problem. Yes, it will need sorting out at some point, but not by us, not now, let’s leave it to the next generation. There’s no hurry. Even the incoming rule about facemasks – yes they’re needed, but we’ll not ask you to do it for a week and a half yet, no hurry!  It’s so hard trying to reconcile those two messages. We do need space and time just to smell the roses, breath some quiet breaths, ground ourselves in peace for a moment. Not to do so leads to the loss of our sense of centredness – we become so tangled up in the business and the stress and the lack of time that we can no longer find ourselves. But equally powerful is the knowledge that we live in urgent times. Our climate is one thing, but society is breaking down around us in ways that also cannot be ignored. Racism, misogyny, extremes of wealth and poverty, hatred and anger and division seem to be taking over. Gone are the days, it feels like, when you could disagree with someone over a policy, or a situation, but still be able to talk in a civil manner, and acknowledge that the other person had a right to their opinion as you did to yours – these days, if you don’t agree, then ‘the opposition’ will find some way of ridiculing, discrediting or generally dissing you! And I know that’s primarily public politics we’re talking, but it’s infectious – it spreads – I do not believe that it is purely coincidence that since the rise of disrespectful, downright vitriolic speech in our politicians, we have equally seen hate crimes and hate speech rise also.  No hurry, said the devil’s apprentice. Just as the climate can reach a tipping point of no return, I wonder if society can as well – become so toxic that we cannot bring it back to the place where we can have honest, respectful, compassionate conversations.  But that’s where we go back to Rev Robert Walsh, you see. The story isn’t decided. It’s still being written. And we have to make sure that our conversations, our stories, are included. We have to make sure that our lives make a difference. And while we can and must take time to breathe, we must also make a stand for justice, and peace, and compassion, with every breath that we take.  Third time the charm. As long as you are alive the story of your life is still being told, and the meaning is still open. As long as there is life in the world, the story of the world is still being told. What is done is done, but nothing is settled. And if nothing is settled, then everything matters. Every choice, every act in the new year matters. Every word, every deed is making the meaning of your life and telling the story of the world. Everything matters in the year coming, and, more importantly, everything matters today.  Everything matters today – each quiet breath as you gain yourself space and calm – and each deep breath as you ready yourself for action – to continue writing the story of the world into justice, and peace, and compassion. Amen. |
| **Blessing**  Our time in this place may have ended for today, but our connection to each other and this community remains.  Together may we walk the path of justice,  speak words of love,  live the selfless deed,  tread gently upon the earth,  and fill the world with compassion.  Until we meet again, Amen. |