**“Answering the Call to Care”**

**Invocation**

Let us still ourselves in silence and invite a loving presence to here amongst us and to awaken from deep within us.

**Light Chalice**

Welcome to this community of love.

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and be inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Let us begin our worship in the spirit of Love.

**Hymn** 196 (Purple) “We sing the faith” words Andrew Hill tune Woodlands 10. 10. 10. 10 by Walter Greatorex

We sing the faith, which gives us confidence

for human dwelling in the vast immense

and finding there within the great unknown

that there’s a cosmic law and order shown.

We sing the hope, which shows us there are ways

for living through our very darkest days

and glimpse beyond a path which leads us on

to find the place where new days have begun.

We sing the love, which is creation’s law,

and in a single whole its parts will draw;

and since parts turn and swerve, collide and move,

forgiveness is the final form of love.

Faith, hope and love, we honour each and three

but there’s one virtue which we all agree

stands out among the others far above

and the ‘greatest of the three is love’.

**Prayer**

I invite you now to join together in a time of prayer...these word’s of prayer will be followed by the prayer that Jesus taught, the Lord’s prayer.

Let us pray

God of love, Divine Spirit of compassion be present here with us this day.

Help us to attune ourselves to the great mysteries of creation, to the wonder of the moment.

Awaken our senses to life itself, to what is both beautiful and holy.

Help us to experience your spirit as it flows through all of life

That is present in our hearts and souls and those of our brothers and sisters.

Help us to let down those barriers that separate us from one another and from our true being. Help us not to deny our weaknesses or to become enslaved by the fear of imperfection.

Bring us into harmony oh God show us how to be all that were born to be.

Deliver us from impatience, intolerance and most of all hate

Bring us to that place of compassionate self giving and self liberating love.

Show us the way oh God...show us the way

Amen

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Story**

Once upon a time...long long ago...in Japan, a woman prayed that God would show her the difference between heaven and hell. She wanted to know whether there were fires in hell, and whether the people in heaven sat around on clouds all day playing harps. She didn’t fancy going to either place if that was all they had to offer.

She prayed so hard that God decided to answer her prayer, and he sent an angel to give her a guided tour of both places...angels are good like that...first she went to hell. It wasn’t hot at all; in fact it looked quite pleasant. There were long tables laden with food of all kinds – cooked meats, vegetables, fruit, delicious pies, and exotic desserts. “This can’t be hell,” she thought. Then she looked at the people. They were sitting some distance from the tables, and they were all miserable – emaciated, pale, angry. Each of them had chopsticks fastened to their hands, but the chopsticks were about three feet long and no matter how hard they tried, the people just couldn’t get the food into their own mouths. They were groaning with hunger, and frustration, and anger. “I’ve seen enough of this,” said the woman. “May I see heaven now?”

The angel took the woman to heaven. They didn’t have far to go. It was just next door. It was almost the same as hell. There were the same kind of tables, the same kind of food, and here too, the people were sitting a little distance away from the tables with three-foot long chopsticks fastened to their hands. But these people seemed happy. They were rosy cheeked, and looked well fed. They were smiling and chatting merrily to each other. They couldn’t put the food into their mouths either, but they had discovered how to be fed and happy: they were feeding each other.

**Reading**

From “Caring and Commitment: Learning to Live the Love We Promise” by Lewis B. Smedes

I am not a hopeful person by nature. When things get tough I am easily tempted to believe that the jig is up. I foreclose on the future all too soon. If my team is not ahead by at least two touchdown in the final five minutes of play, I hear defeat blowing in the winds. In my marriage I have often had to be rescued from my own pessimism by Doris's power to hope that there were good possibilities within the worst of our problems. I sometimes suspected that she was denying reality. But she was not denying: she really saw possibilities to which my despair had blinded me.

"Out of my private struggles with despair, I have come to see that hope is the final secret of all commitment.

"When two people are committed to each other, when the innerspring of their commitment is care, each for the other, there are possibilities in the toughest situations. Not certainties. But possibilities. Not possibilities of things being all we've ever wanted them to be. But possibilities of things becoming better than they are. Good enough to make the future together, as friends, as partners, as family, better for having kept on caring for each other just a little more than we care for ourselves.

"In sum, what I've been saying here is that commitments live on hope. Not on duty, not on what we are obligated to do, but on hope for what we can do. And for what others can do for us. Hope is the alternative to the seductions of the uncommitted life.

"Hope is energy.

"Hope is energy to cope when life gets tough. And, when you get down to brass tacks, it is the energy we need for commitment keeping in a world where somebody, at any moment, may rain on your parade."

**Hymn** 116 (Green) “Praise, My Soul”

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven,

To his feet thy tribute bring;

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

Evermore his praises sing:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Praise the everlasting King.

Praise him for his grace and favour

To our forbears in distress;

Praise him still the same for ever,

Slow to chide and swift to bless:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Glorious in his faithfulness.

Tenderly, he guides and spares us;

Well our feeble frame he knows;

In his hands he gently bears us,

Rescues us from all our foes:

Alleluia, Alleluis!

Widely yet his mercy flows.

Angels in the height, adore him;

Ye behold him face to face;

Sun and moon, bow down before him,

Dwellers all in time and space;

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Praise with us the God of grace.

**Readings**

**Mark Ch 8 vv 1-9**

8In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 2‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. 3If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.’ 4His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’ 5He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ 6Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. 7They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.8They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. 9Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.

From “The Caregiver's Tao Te Ching: Compassionate Caring for Your Loved Ones and Yourself” by Nancy Martin and William Martin

**We Are Good**

Not trying to be good,  
we are free to truly care.  
When we try to be good,  
our caring loses power.  
We work harder  
and accomplish less.  
  
Trying to be good  
is a pale imitation of caring.  
It blooms like a flower for a moment,  
but it fades soon after blooming.  
Our caregiving is the fruit at the center of life,  
not the flower.  
We don't have to try to be good.  
We are good.

"We all have a natural desire to express goodness. In childhood, this innate goodness became overlaid with definitions and meanings as we experienced the approval and disapproval of those around us. Many of us were taught that if we were not careful we would end up being 'bad.'

"Whether we are working as caregiving professionals or serving members of our family, it is not unusual for us to feel the grip of this conditioning. If we are not aware of it, our work becomes much more difficult. We try hard to please and end up frustrated, discouraged, or rebellious when we don't get the response we expect.

"Trusting our inherent goodness, we act naturally out of our compassion and wisdom. There is no need to weigh and judge what we will do or how others react. We do not need to try to be good. Goodness came to us at our first breath."

**Meditation**

**SILENCE**

Amen.

**MUSIC FOR MEDITATION**

**Hymn** 97 (Purple) “Love knocks and waits for us to hear” words and music by Daniel Charles Damon Tune Angels Camp C.M.

Love knocks and waits for us to hear,

to open and invite;

love longs to quiet every fear,

and seeks to set things right.

Love offers life, in spite of foes

who threaten and condemn;

embracing enemies, love goes

the second mile with them.

Love comes to heal the broken heart,

to ease the troubled mind;

without a word love bids to start

to ask to seek and find.

Love knocks and enters at the sound

of welcome from within;

love sings and dances all around,

and feels new life begin.

**Reading**

From “Walking in Light: The Everyday Empowerment of a Shamanic Life” by Sandra Ingerman

Creating a Prayer Tree

"Here is a wonderful tradition you can share to bring your community together. You can create a prayer tree for loved ones, coworkers, and community to tie prayer ribbons on the branches to support each other's prayers. It is something that you can create in your house, at work, and in your community. This tradition is seen in many different countries. I first learned about it as a Siberian tradition, where it is common to find a prayer tree. In Siberia trees are seen as the most sacred beings because they bridge heaven and earth. They bridge heaven through their branches and the earth through their roots. As humans we bridge heaven and earth with our arms up to heaven and our feet planted on the earth. We create that bridge through our hearts.

"Juniper trees are typically used for a Siberian prayer tree. The shaman divines the appropriate tree. After the right tree is found, there are days of ceremony performed where traditional food and drink offerings are left by the tree. The tree is honored for volunteering to carry prayers to the creative forces of the universe. The shaman in the community chants and gives thanks to the helping spirits for carrying the prayers of the people up to the universe so that their dreams can manifest on Earth. The ribbons tied on to the tree are empowered by individuals in the community with personal prayers for themselves, for loved ones, for family, and the community.

"You can see these trees throughout Siberia with brightly colored large ribbons tied on branches. I saw a photo of a prayer tree in Siberia where there were so many ribbons and pieces of fabric on the tree, the branches started touching the ground. The branches had become so heavy from all the ribbons empowered with the prayers of those who made pilgrimages to the tree. An important teaching is to tie the ribbons loosely onto the branches so their growth is not choked off or stunned."

**Address**

I’ve had a quite a busy first week back, after a few days off on leave. Now some of that was my own doing, as I have been trying to offer more and more on Zoom, maybe trying to do too much. Three groups hosted this week, including “Living the Questions” for the first time on Zoom. I have also conducted two funerals. The first was Gordon Rees, the brother of John Rees a much loved long time member at Queens Road and the second Richard Kirkwood, a beloved member of Dunham Road. It is hard to minister as I would normally do during these times of physical separation. How do we care for one another, when we have to stay physically apart? How do we show love and compassion in new ways? It is not easy and goes against so many of our natural love and compassion. How do we care for one another now? How do we care for one another in the future? Some folk are saying we will never go back to how we once showed our love and compassion, that we will lose something of our humankindness due to our physical separateness. I for one do not believe this. This did not happen in the past, after other pandemics and I do not believe it will happen in the future. The future of course begins now and the question this brings for me is how do we offer care now?

I am particularly concerned about our care homes. There has been a great deal of loss of life and suffering within them these last few months. Much needs to be done to address this. Families have been unable to be with their loved ones when they have needed them the most, this has led to a great deal of mental, emotional and spiritual deterioration, something that needs to be addressed in as safe a way as possible while we still live with this deadly virus. How do we care for our loved ones, for those who need physical interaction while not putting each other’s lives in danger? There are no simple solutions. I know how comforting it was for two of Richard’s children that they were able to be with him as he took his final breaths, sadly one was not able to get there on time. So many other families have had to remain apart though these last few months. I know how much this has intensified grief. Hard times!

My hope is that as we move forward that this will bring about change in how we care for one another. In many ways people have begun to see how much our lives depend on one another. How we act towards one another really matters. Now of course the physical separation may lead to a fear of the other, but then again it may lead to this sense that we need to find ways to care for one another, not just our nearest and dearest, but the whole of humanity. As a global society we have acted together to try and contain this deadly virus, so why can’t we do the same to solve the other problems that we as one humanity face, poverty, climate change, prejudice and violence of all kinds. We are one human family; surely no one can doubt this anymore. Sadly some still do.

We need to find new ways to care, to love one another and it needs to begin now.

Earlier we shared one of my favourite stories, “Heaven and Hell”. In the story both appear to be exactly the same and yet they are experienced oh so differently. In Hell all go hungry because everyone tries to feed themselves only, they are purely self reliant. And yet in heaven they attempt to feed one another and are therefore fed in abundance. To me this is as much about the relationships as the food going into one another’s mouths. I believe that we all possess an innate need to serve one another that if we do not do this part of our natural humanity withers away and dies off. By not serving one another we starve our souls.

An interesting aspect of the story is how they overcome the handicap of the length of spoons and their distance from one another and the food. Maybe in the tale there is a lesson in how we learn to care for one another despite being physically apart. Ok we cannot hug and hold, but we can love, feed and care for one another in other ways. Maybe by using our imaginations and finding new ways to care and feed one another we can begin to create that kin-dom of love, Heaven here on earth.

I was in Marks and Spencer’s on Tuesday, buying food for the day as I worked from the vestry. There I was masked up when in front of me was Angela and her carer both in their masks. It was the first time Angela had been in Marks and Spencer’s since lock down and it was a delight for all three of us to communicate and offer our love and care, it lifted my heart. A love I shared with several people I spoke on the phone that day. One of whom, Sue Roberts, shared some memories of Richard with me. Just reminding me of want a genuinely loving human being he was. How he made everyone you feel welcome as you were, exactly as you were. That he was truly “the salt of the earth”, a person of great kindness, reliability and honesty.” She told me of a time when she was new to the congregation and left chapel upset one day, she was grieving the loss of her father. She told me that May and Richard took her to one side and said “Look Sue, what you have to remember is that you are amongst friends and they care about you and will do anything they can to help you.” She remembered these words exactly as they were said, even though they were uttered 40 years ago. Words of love, words of care, words of people living out their faith. They cared and it showed through their lives. They fed those they met and in feeding they too were fed.

There are several slightly different accounts in the Gospels of Jesus feeding crowds of people. Some get hung up on the facts of whether Jesus could feed the thousands of people present with just a few fish and loaves, but is this what these stories are about? I do not think so. To get hung up on the factual accuracy is to miss the whole point of the teaching behind the stories. “Mythos” is not about fact; it is about revealing deeper universal truth. The key phrase in this account from Mark (Ch 8 vv 1-9) are the words “They ate and were filled”. In the account Jesus cares for the crowd, he recognises their hunger and shares a meal with them The crowd eat and are filled, because their hunger is recognised and met in the encounter of feeding face to face, in the beautiful human encounter. They are cared for and they are loved.

Now of course this is perhaps not easy to do now, but we can find ways to get around it. We cannot wish the virus away, but we can find ways to care for one another right here, right now and find new ways to address the many needs in this our shared world. Now is the time to get creative, to meet the needs of our shared world and our shared humanity.

I recently discovered the following poem “Becoming Bread” by Gunilla Norris. It is wonderful.

"Becoming Bread" by Gunilla Norris

Crumbs

"Be careful with the crumbs.  
Do not overlook them.

"Be careful with the crumbs:  
the little chances to love,

"the tiny gestures, the morsels  
that feed, the minims.

"Take care of the crumbs:  
a look, a laugh, a smile,

"a teardrop, an open hand. Take care  
of the crumbs. They are food also.

"Do not let them fall.  
Gather them. Cherish them.

Isn’t it just beautiful? I certainly think so. Maybe here is a way to begin to care. I don’t just mean by picking up the pieces when this is all over, but to begin right now. We can’t feed as abundantly as we would like to, not even now as we are spending a little more time together. We cannot attend to all of societies needs, but we can do something we can be careful with the crumbs, with the tiny morsels that we are left with. We do not have to overlook them; they are precious in themselves. Ok we cannot go up to a person and give them a big hug, but we can offer a tiny gesture, a morsel that can feed. We offer kindness and care in the tiny little gestures, a look, a laugh and a smile. Both myself and Angela and her carer were able to do so from behind our masks in Marks and Spencer’s and it meant so much. Just as the conversation I had with Sue as she shared precious memories of Richard and May with me and how their simple loving care was feeding her some forty years later. Just as the tender love shared by Richard’s family on Zoom touched me deeply, even though it was through a screen. Yes, ok it wasn’t a full meal, not what we are used to, but the living intention behind it was deep and meaningful. Just as the love we share in times of desolation can mean so much, perhaps even more as it is rationed at this time.

Maybe we will see just how precious this all is as we move forward; maybe the sparseness of physical affection will show to us just how precious our lives and interactions are; maybe this will bring about respair, this fresh and new hope; maybe we can begin to offer deeper care in new and wonderful ways, I for one believe that it can. It is up to us. We have already been doing it. I have seen it from the very beginning of this pandemic. Whether it was in the rituals of celebration or sorrow as we paid homage to our shared suffering; whether that has been footballers taking the knee in support of “Black Lives Matter”, children decorating their homes with rainbows, the clapping for healthcare workers and how vital they are to our lives. Or in the many ways that people have been trying to keep one another connected. In the ways that community support groups and places of worship are finding to offer worship and other activities. I know my ministry will never be the same again.

It has all filled me with deep hope, hope in our human capacity to care, even in the time of crisis. I just hope that this spurs us on to take care of the needs of all our world. For it depends on our care for one another and for the whole of life.

It is in our hands. We must offer the care and we must learn to find new ways to share.

So annoyingly I going to leave you with some homework this week. I want you to go away and look around you; look for where care is needed in your own lives, in your families, your communities, the wider world. What needs care, what care can we offer? Instead of getting depressed about what we cannot do at this time, instead let’s look for what we can do, what ways we can offer care. For in so doing we will begin to feed one another, and we will all eat and we will all be filled.

Amen.

**Final Hymn** 90 (Purple) “Let us give thanks and praise” words Peter Sampson Tune 12.12.12.12 Ralph Vaughan Williams

Let us give thanks and praise for the gists which we share,

for the food and our friendship, for water and air,

for the earth and the sky and the stars and the sea,

and the trust we all have in God’s love flowing free.

Give a shout of amazement at what life can bring,

put your heart into raising the song all can sing.

What a world we could build with our minds and our hands

where the people live freely and God understands.

Let us give of our best with the tools we shall need,

use our eyes, hands and brains so that we may succeed.

Inspire us to cultivate what we have sown

so that nature and nurture make a world we may own.

We adore you great Mother, O help us to live

with a love for each other that each one can give

let the pain of our brothers and sisters be faced

and the healing of all souls on earth be embraced.

**Benediction**

Go now in peace.   
Deeply regard each other.   
Truly listen to each other.   
Speak what each of you must speak.   
Be ready in any moment to disarm your own heart,   
and always live as if a realm of love had begun.

And may the blessings of God be with us in all that we feel and all that we think say and all that we do.

Amen