**Monton Unitarian Church**

**6th September 2020**

**Standing together**

**Welcome**

My dearest friends, it may feel like five years since we have stood here together, rather than five months. In the grand scheme of life, it has been but a heartbeat, a fraction of time – but for our hearts and souls it has felt much longer than that.

We have felt isolated and alone, bereft of familiar faces and patterns of life, yet our spirits could be lifted by a hand-written note, or the sound of a friend’s voice on the phone.

But finally, we are here together again. And yet – even this is unfamiliar. This is not what we remember – this is not the gathering together that we knew and loved, where we could hold each other in our arms, move from one to the other without concern for distance or closeness – sing our hearts out to the great tunes of the past and present.

And while some of us are here together, there are many who are not here – who are not yet ready to risk coming out, or are unwell, or during the last five months have had to move into nursing homes, or are no longer with us. And there are others that we miss who left us even before the pandemic started, months ago or years ago – but it still doesn’t feel right without them, and that hurts too, we miss their love to help us get through this time of strangeness.

And so this service is going to be both a time of joy, as we celebrate beginning to find our way back towards each other, and of grieving for the distance that still exists between us, and for what we have lost.

But whether you share this service with us at home, either reading it or watching the recorded video, or whether you are physically present in church this Sunday morning, know that you are grieving and celebrating in the company of others, and that you are, each of you, loved and held by so many.

And so.

We come, together yet apart, to give thanks for life, and health.

We come, together yet apart, to grieve for what we have lost.

We come, together yet apart, to acknowledge our fears and anxieties.

We come, together yet apart, to share our hopes and dreams.

We come, together yet apart, to worship.

**Hymn**

We may not be able to sing together (yet), but we can listen – and so we will listen to a hymn that we have sung many times together, Come and find the quiet centre, by Shirley Erena Murray.

Come and find the quiet centre in the crowded life we lead,

 find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:

clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes, that we can see

 all the things that really matter, be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a friend who claims us, cools the heat and slows the pace,

 God it is who speaks and names us, knows our being, touches base,

making space within our thinking, lifting shades to show the sun,

 raising courage when we're shrinking, finding scope for faith begun.

In the Spirit let us travel, open to each other's pain,

 let our loves and fears unravel, celebrate the space we gain:

there's a place for deepest dreaming, there's a time for heart to care,

 in the Spirit's lively scheming there is always room to spare!

**Story – Only the Seed, by Margaret Silf**

Once upon a time, a pilgrim set out on the long journey in search of peace, joy and love. The pilgrim walked for many weary miles, and time passed.

Gradually, the young, lively steps became slower and more laboured. The Pilgrim’s journey passed through landscapes that were not always happy ones. Through war. Through sickness. Through quarrels and rejections and separations. A land where, it seemed, the more people possessed, the more warlike they became – the more they had to defend, the more they needed to attack each other. Longing for peace, they prepared for war. Longing for love, they surrounded themselves with walls of distrust and barriers of fear. Longing for life, they were walking deeper into death.

But one morning, the pilgrim came to a little cottage at the wayside. Something about this little cottage attracted the pilgrim. It was as though it was lit up from the inside. Full of curiosity, the pilgrim knocked, and went inside. And inside the cottage was a little shop, and behind the counter stood a shopkeeper. It was hard to judge the age – hard to say for sure whether it was a man or a woman. There was an air of timelessness about the place.

“What would you like?”, asked the shopkeeper in a kindly voice.

“What do you stock here?”, asked the pilgrim.

“Oh, we have all the things here that you most long for”, replied the shopkeeper. “Just tell me what you desire.” Well, the pilgrim hardly knew where to begin. So many desires came rushing to mind at once.

“I want peace – in my own family, in my native land and in the whole world.

I want to make something good of my life.

I want those who are sick to be well again and those who are lonely to have friends.

I want those who are hungry to have enough to eat.

I want every child born on this planet today to have a chance to be educated.

I want everyone on earth to live in freedom.

I want this world to be a kingdom of love.”

There was a pause while the pilgrim reviewed this shopping list.

Gently, the shopkeeper broke in. “I’m sorry”, came the quiet reply. “I should have explained. We don’t supply the fruits here. We only supply the seeds.”

The things that we want most, for ourselves, for our congregation, for our community, cannot be just purchased in a shop, or acquired in one fell swoop – the things that we want must be grown, gently nurtured over time, fed with our passion and enthusiasm, watered with our love and compassion. Only that way can we achieve the goals we have set ourselves. Only then will our community show its glorious potential – because the growing is never over, there is always another step to take, another seed to plant. But the work is worth it.

**Prayer and Candle-lighting**

So many times, throughout history, and throughout the world, people have lit candles as part of prayer. We are no exception to this – the very symbol of our denomination is a flaming chalice, after all! And today, once again, we shall light candles together. If you are at home listening to this video, you may wish to pause while you find a candle if you wish to light one with us.

There shall be a time of words, a time of quietness, and a time of music – as I invite you, in your own time, to light a candle.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love, over these last months we have lost so much – and gained more than we realise. We have lost routines, and loved ones, jobs and roles in life, holiday plans, grand schemes and baby steps towards our futures. And we grieve for these, and for all the other losses we have experienced throughout our lives – each one creates a void that changes how we look at life, how we respond to new events, how we feel about ourselves.

But we have also gained, over these past few months. We have gained space and time and quietness, to sit alongside ourselves, to question ourselves, to re-find ourselves – our priorities, our needs, our hopes and fears for ourselves and for our loved ones and for the world.

And though it feels like such a long time that our lives have been held in limbo, we still do not feel ready to step back out, just as we used to – but instead each step is cautious – is this ok yet, is this safe, should I, should we, what if? And some of us are still in limbo, still waiting for the scientists to find a vaccine that is our only hope for normality, or for medical treatment for pre-existing conditions to be re-started, for jobs to begin again, or new jobs to be found.

So much to grieve for – so much to hope for.

And so we are here, worshipping, together yet apart, the something that we hope is holding us all, as we hold each other. And we will each have our own words that we need to say, or our own silences to hold. And so we come now to a time of silence. During which you are invited, slowly and gently and allowing plenty of space around each other, to light a candle somewhere around the church near you – or at home, if that is where you are for this service.

Whisper your prayer in your heart, call it out loud in your soul, or even speak it out loud if you need someone else to hear it. But this is your space, now, to say your prayer, to hold your own silence, and to light a candle.

We have come through dark times – and there will always be dark times of one kind or another to go through in the future. But we bring with us the light in our hearts and minds, the love in our souls, and the knowledge that we are not alone.

**Reflection**

So here we are. Many, though not all of us, are gathered together once again in our beautiful church – the surroundings may feel familiar, but the circumstances aren’t. And the times that lie ahead of us are far from clear even now – so many questions about second spikes, and further lockdowns, and will there ever be a vaccine, and will we ever feel the same about shaking hands, and holding a friend in our arms.

But in other ways, there are many things that are clear for us, and very familiar. The roof still needs mending. The leaks still need fixing. The legal documents still have to be completed and filed. Eventually, coffee will need making again (it seems strange that I could ask for a licence and sell you a pint, but can’t make you a free cup of coffee after service, but there you go!), and there will be cleaning parties, and fundraising events, and charity projects, plumbing and painting and so much more. We still want for this church to be a beacon of hope in difficult times, both the building and the community – and so there is work for us to do.

But we don’t get to ‘buy’ the things we want, as the pilgrim wanted in our story – we must grow them from seed. From what we bring to the community, the gifts and talents we can offer, we can cultivate our legacy. And we should never think that what we offer is too basic, or too boring, or too unskilled to be worth much…. Here’s another of Margaret Silf’s stories – entitled Men at Work (yes it is men, it’s based on the middle ages when it would have been men doing this job!).

During the Middle Ages, a traveller once came upon a place in France where a great deal of building work was going on. He began talking with the stone cutters and asking them about their work.

He approached the first worker and asked, “What are you doing?”

The man, very disgruntled and obviously unhappy in his hard toil, replied “I’m cutting these huge boulders with the simplest of tools and putting them together in the way I’ve been told to do. I’m sweating in this heat, and my back is hurting. What’s more I’m totally bored and I wish I didn’t have to do this hard and meaningless job.”

The traveller moved on quickly to interview a second worker. He asked the same question: “What are you doing?”.

The worker replied, “Well, I have a wife and children at home, so I come here every morning and I work these boulders into regular shapes as I’m told to do. It gets repetitive sometimes, but it helps to feed my family and that’s all I want.”

Somewhat encouraged, the traveller went on to a third worker. “And what are you doing?” he asked.

The third worker responded with shining eyes, as he pointed up to the heavens. “I’m building a cathedral!”

We can build a cathedral too (some would say we’ve already got a physical one – my kids called this church the mini cathedral the first time they saw it and it’s stuck!). But our community can be as strong and magnificent as a cathedral too – not by being flashy or intricate, or having gaudy architecture, but by the little things – each little block of stone, each little caring gesture, each gift of love however shown. Grow a garden of love – build a cathedral of compassionate community – create a sanctuary of sacred shelter – whatever metaphor you wish to use. With the gifts and talents and offerings that each of us bring, that is what we are doing. Even during total lockdown, it didn’t stop – each phone call, letter, email, prayer, continued to create beloved community.

We’ve all lost things these last six months, precious things of love and humanity and time and place. We lose things, precious things, throughout our lives, some of which cast only fleeting shadows, some of which carve deep memories of pain and joy into our very beings. But just as a hollow reed can become a flute, and a carved-out tree-root can become a violin, so we who have lost, and been carved and hollowed out, are instruments playing in a symphony of infinite beauty. We may only play a few notes – we may only contribute a few bricks to the cathedral – we may never see the completed garden – but we can plant the seeds, and play our part.

And that is why we are here – here in the church building, here at home, here wherever we are participating in this service – here to worship the Spirit of Life and Love, and in its name create Beloved Community.

Thank you for being part of this community.

**Blessing**

May the seeds of love and peace that we sow flourish and bloom.

May the bricks of justice and equality that we quarry build cathedrals of joy.

May the gestures of compassion and welcome that we offer create sanctuaries of sacred space.

And may we know that all that we are, all our pain and all our joy, is cherished, and valued, and loved.

Amen.