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| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **A Harvest of Wheat, Words and Works**  **4th October 2020** |
| **Welcome to our service for Sunday 4th October – a harvest of wheat, words and works.**    This day is a special day. It is a day for the celebration of all that is worthy, all that is beautiful, all that is holy.  It is a day for rejoicing in the grandeur of the natural world.  It is a day for reflection on the possibilities of human resources.  It is a day to be humble before the awesome mystery that is the foundation of life.  Let us use this day to remind ourselves of the goodness of life and of the part we play in keeping the wheel of life ever turning. |
| **Music**  Cat Stevens – Morning has broken |
| **Prayer – author unknown**  Spirit of Life, We gather at this time of harvest, to give thanks for the many blessings we receive, and to acknowledge the work which has made them possible. So much of our lives is disconnected from the earth which sustains us, and we pause now to remember its bounty.   Along with the bounty, life on earth meets much hardship. At this time of harvest, as the weather turns, we prepare for the coming winter. We pray for the strength to endure the coming cold, we give thanks for the food and the fuel which will help us to survive it.  And as we prepare for the future, may we remember also the past. All of us hold in our hearts the memories both of joy and of sorrow. We give thanks for the happiness we have known, and we pray that we may survive the hardships of the spirit as well as of the body. As the winter is made easier by the harvest stores and the knowledge of the following spring, so may our spiritual winters be made easier by the memory of joy and the good things still to come.  But we would also remember those from whom earth’s bounty has been withheld, by circumstances of climate, of poverty, of war. And those for whom the coming seasons bring not the excitement of festivals and celebrations, but instead anticipation of yet more hunger, more violence, more suffering and more fear. May we work to find ways to share the good things we have with those who are in need, and building a lasting peace in which all can share in earth’s gifts. Amen.  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 – Fruits, by Christopher Buice**  Once upon a time, a mother and her daughter were carrying bags of food to a village where people were hungry and had no food of their own. The two had to travel a great distance, which made them very tired, so they stopped to rest. As they sat down they heard a voice call out to them.  “Hello,” said the voice.  The two travelers looked around, but saw no one.  “Hello!” said the voice again. “Look over here by the rock.”  The mother and her daughter looked over by the rock and there they saw a thorn bush. The two looked at the thorn bush for a moment and then they looked at each other.  “I believe that thorn bush is talking to us,” said the little girl.  “I am not a thorn bush!” said the voice. “I am a beautiful apple tree. If you like, you may sit awhile and admire my beauty.”  “If you don’t mind my saying so,” said the little girl. “You do not look anything like an apple tree and you do look exactly like a thorn bush.”  “Silly girl!” said the voice. “I am the most beautiful apple tree in all the land. Please feel free to sit and enjoy my beauty.”  “Are you quite sure you are an apple tree?” asked the mother.  “Yes,” said the voice from the thorn bush. “I am quite sure.”  “Then perhaps you can help us,” said the mother. “You see, we are carrying food to a neighboring village where people are hungry. Since you are an apple tree, you could give us some apples to take to the people who have nothing to eat.”  “No,” said the voice from the thorn bush.  “No?” asked the mother. “Why not? The people are very hungry. They don’t have any food at all. They would love to have some of your apples.”  “No,” repeated the voice from the thorn bush. “You see, I don’t have any apples right now.”  “Oh,” said the mother. “That’s too bad.” After a moment she said, “Well, we must be going.” And the mother and daughter stood up and continued on the road to the village.  “Come back!” cried the thorn bush. “Come back and admire my beauty!” But the mother and the daughter did not hear the thorn bush.  After the two had traveled many more miles, they became very tired once again and decided it was time to stop and rest. They had not been sitting long when they heard another voice.  “Hello,” said the voice.  The mother and her daughter looked around awhile before they noticed a very small man sitting next to a rock. The man was dressed in very stylish and expensive clothes.  “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not a bad man. I won’t hurt you. In fact, I’m a very good man.”  “You’re a good man?” asked the mother uncertainly.  “Oh, yes!” he said. “I’m a very, very good man. I read the holy book everyday for hours and hours. I pray each morning when I rise and pray again in the evening when I go to bed.”  “Are you quite sure you’re a good man?” asked the mother.  “Oh, yes!” he replied. “I’m quite sure.”  “Well, then, perhaps you will help us,” said the mother. “My daughter and I are carrying food to a village where the people are hungry. We’re very tired from walking for so long. Would you please help us carry these bags to the village so that the people there will have something to eat?”  “No,” said the little man. “I’m a good man, but if I were to help you carry those bags, I might mess up my nice new clothes. Then I might not look as good. How would anyone know I’m a good man if I don’t look fine? Sorry, but I can’t help you.”  “Oh,” the mother said. “That’s too bad.” After a moment she said, “Well, we must be on our way!” And the two picked up their bags of food and continued down the road.  “No! Come back!” yelled the little man. “Stay here with me, I am very lonely!”  But the mother and her daughter didn’t hear the little man, and they continued walking on the road to the village.  For a while the two walked in silence. Finally, the daughter said to her mother, “I’m confused. Today we have seen a strange plant that claimed to be an apple tree. And we also saw a strange little man who claimed to be a good man. But how can we be sure? I mean, how can we tell a real apple tree from a fake one? Or a real good person from a fake one?”  “Well,” said the mother. “It isn’t always easy to tell the difference between something that is real and something that is fake. But it seems to me that if you want to call yourself an apple tree, then you should give the world some apples! And if you want to call yourself a good person, then you should give this world some loving kindness and a helping hand. After all, it is by our fruits that we are known.” |
| **Music** |
| Reading – God Gave Me a Word, by Amy Petrie Shaw I was talking with God the other day, ‘cause we’re cool like that. And God said “Hey, I want you to tell people something.” And I was kinda busy, so I pretended like I didn't hear. And God poked me and said, “I’m not kidding. Pay attention,” (‘cause while we’re cool, we aren’t that cool And I know when I have pushed it way too far.) So I put down my coffee cup and I turned around.  And God said, “Let me hang a Word around your neck, so that Everyone can see it. And you better speak it when you’re out, ‘cause I’ll know if you don’t. And it will be heavy, so heavy, on your soul.”  And a Word was hung around my neck to take out to the people standing in the streets. A Word was preached into my ear and laid into my mouth and burned into my Heart until all I could see was the shape of the Word and the Word was all. And the Word was Love.  And God said “Now get out because you don’t have all day, and that Word is gonna get heavier. And you got some work yet to do.  So I’m taking my Word out into the world.  Love came down on this green earth. Love came down and turned over the tables and set the world on its end Love made it clear that it was the Word for the poor and the broken hearted. For the queer boi and the angry girl. Love was the Word for late night hookers and the long haul truckers, for the heroin junkie and the runaway cutters.  Love was the Word for all of the screwed up and pushed over and too tired and I can’t take no more. Love was the Word for the HIV patient and the man with no papers. Love was the Word for me and for you, for the saints and the sinners and the scramblers in between.  Love came down and made a way for there to be a way and then Love said “We are never going back.”  (he who has ears let him hear)  Love said we are all a part of something bigger and if you cannot rise with us, if you cannot Love with us then you should get the Hell out of the way because we aren’t going anywhere and you are in the path.  (he who has ears let him hear)  Love came down for the World to know and I'm holding out this Word so even when you and God are just like that you can’t pretend you didn't know.  I cannot put it down.  Not for a politician spewing hatred. Not for a minister vomiting out bile in the costume of a saint. Not for money or for country or for kin.  I'm holding my Word in my mouth ‘Cause the next time I see God I wanna be able to say “You gave me a Word and I carried it just the way you asked. You gave it to me and I took it. I showed it to everyone I met. You gave it to me and I showed it to her and ze and him. I showed it to them and they and those over there.  I never put it down. (I can never put it down).  I was talking with God the other day, ‘cause we’re cool like that. And God said “Hey, I want you to tell people something.” And I was still kinda busy, so I pretended like I didn't hear. And God said, “I’m not kidding. Pay attention,” (‘cause while we’re cool, we aren’t that cool And I know when I have pushed it way too far.) So I put down my coffee cup and I turned around.  And then God gave me a Word. And now I've given it to you.  Start moving. |
| **Prayer – For the Harvest, by Cliff Reed**  For the harvest of the year, hard-won from an earth at once bountiful and grudging, we give thanks.  For all our cleverness, all our technology, all our pride in our own achievements, we are as dependent on our mother-planet as were our forebears, remote in time, who first scratched a living from its surface.  We are sojourners here. With reverence and wisdom we must till the soil. It is not ours to own and dispose of as we will. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” And it is our children’s and our children’s children’s too. For them it must be as fertile, as green, and as rich in life as it has been for us. We must do what we can to make it so, as faithful stewards of this good earth. For the harvest of the year, we give thanks…  And for the harvest of the years, we give thanks; the harvest of shared faith and shared work, a shared spirit and a shared endeavour. As the harvest of the earth is both an ending and a beginning, so may the harvest of the years, the harvest of faithful hopeful, loving community – for all its endless endings – be always rich with new beginnings.  May it be so. Amen. |
| **Music** |
| The Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 13, The Parable of the Sower **13**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake.**2**Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. **3**And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. **4**And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. **5**Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.**6**But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. **7**Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. **8**Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. **9**Let anyone with ears[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+13#fen-NRSVA-23549a)] listen!’ **…** **18**‘Hear then the parable of the sower. **19**When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. **20**As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; **21**yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+13#fen-NRSVA-23561c)] **22**As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. **23**But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’  When it comes to harvest services, we generally think about food. Those of us who came to churches 20, 30 or more years ago will have memories of harvest festival services where the church would have been covered with greenery and flowers, displays of fruit and vegetables and sheafs of wheat, and all sorts of farm produce would be brought to be blessed and taken on to a deserving place such as a hospice, or split up into parcels for struggling members of our community.  In recent years our harvest gifts have morphed into cans and packets, and toothpaste and shower gel, to be taken to local food banks. This year, some of our churches are not even able to meet in person yet – and so I’ve seen harvest celebrated with comedy fabric fruit on zoom calls, with people opening up their cupboards and speaking out loud their thanks for what they have, and stepping out into gardens and parks and moorland and giving thanks for the green and the blue, and the red and the orange, and the air and water and earth that surrounds them.  And while all of that is still so vital – and while we are still so grateful – this year my mind is focusing on a different type of harvest.  There’s a harvest of words. The words that Amy Petrie Shaw talks about, the ones that God, or our own deepest humanity asks us to speak – the words of love. The words that say to those who are hurting, I am here, you’re not alone. The words that say to those who are grieving, that the love you knew is still present and real and will never leave you – and you are not alone. The words that say to those who are frightened, you have depths of courage you have not even explored yet, and you are strong enough to survive even the fiercest of storms – and you are not alone. The words that say to those who are joyful, stand up and celebrate this joy and sing it from the roof tops, and we will sing your joy with you – because you are not alone. The words that say to those who are working constantly to try to help others and bring healing to the world and its people, we bow in awe at your resilience and your persistence, just as we recognise the effort that it is taking – and you are not alone.  Those are the words that we try to say to each other in so many different ways in this community, and in other communities like ours around the world. While there are times I am quite happy to acknowledge that the thought of being a complete hermit has its attractions, I know that it is not a sustainable way of living, nor is it a compassionate way of living – because we need people alongside us – and we need to offer our presence to be alongside others.  And if those words of love are the seeds we plant, the harvest we will reap will be a stronger community, one that is healthy, that offers healing, and that, most importantly, can turn its face outwards, and reach out its arms to the people around it, whether close at hand or on the other side of the globe.  And that’s the other sort of harvest. Because as we all know, talking the talk ain’t the same as walking the walk, although it’s a damn good start, and what begins as a conversation, a discussion, a planning meeting, can evolve and grow into dynamic, vibrant action that can transform lives and break down barriers.  The things we do in our communities, the actions we take, can all make a difference. We’re going to be celebrating one difference we’ve made after this service, as we cut the ribbon on our accessibility ramp – yes I know some of you will have walked up it several times already, but sometimes we just need to cut a ribbon, and Barbara is going to do that for us after this service – and then zoom down the ramp at high speed, I’m sure, just for fun! In the grand scheme of things it may not be much – it doesn’t feed a single starving child, or bring conflicts closer to peace, for example – but it makes a statement that, when we say that everyone is welcome, we really do mean it. And if we mean it in our church building, we mean it in our community – and in our society – and in our world.  The goods you have brought here this morning is another example – again, it’s small, it will reach a few people but not many, and it does nothing to change the unjust structures in society that have created the situation wherein foodbanks are needed – but it makes a statement, it is us show/saying that word Love in a way that will make a practical difference to someone.  If we think back to our story, with the thorn tree and the so-called ‘good man’, what did the mother say at the end? “Well,” said the mother. “It isn’t always easy to tell the difference between something that is real and something that is fake. But it seems to me that if you want to call yourself an apple tree, then you should give the world some apples! And if you want to call yourself a good person, then you should give this world some loving kindness and a helping hand. After all, it is by our fruits that we are known.”  And from our reading - Love said we are all a part of something bigger and if you cannot rise with us, if you cannot Love with us then you should get the Hell out of the way because we aren’t going anywhere and you are in the path.  (he who has ears let him hear). – God gave me a word, and now I’ve given it to you. Start moving.  So today – and everyday – we celebrate the harvest of wheat, the food and water and warmth that we are blessed with, just as we also acknowledge the appalling inequality all around us, that not everybody has food security, and that food banks and hunger are now commonplace. We celebrate the harvest of words, as we speak the word of Love in as many ways we can to as many people we can and encourage others to do the same. And we celebrate the harvest of works – whether that is making our building accessible and welcoming, or collecting for our local food banks, or campaigning for climate justice, or supporting a local refugee.  Wheat, words and works – a veritable harvest of love for ourselves, our community, and our world. For this, and all our blessings, we give thanks. |
| **Blessing**  May the road rise with you  May the wind be always at your back  May the sun shine warm upon your face  May the rain fall soft upon your fields  And until we meet again,  May Love hold you  In the hollow of her hands. |