

## WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

### CALL TO WORSHIP:

*God upholds the cause of the oppressed,  
and gives food to the hungry.  
God lifts up those who are bowed down;  
God loves the righteous.  
God watches over the foreigner,  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow.*  
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 146.7-9, adapted)

**HYMN:** O worship the King

### PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

We thank you for this opportunity to enter your presence to worship you; indeed, we thank you that you call us to do so. We thank you that, in the dialogue of worship, you remind us of your ways, and challenge us to do better at living in them. We thank you too, that in the dialogue of worship, our relationships with you and each other are strengthened and deepened.

As we begin our worship, though, we are all aware of ways in which we have failed to be and to do what you expect of us. We have allowed ourselves to be sidetracked by the ways of the world around us as well as by our own self-centered desires. As a result, we have done hurtful things that have displeased you, and have failed to do good things that you have wanted us to do.

We acknowledge, then, that we come into your presence as sinners, but we also trust in your love and grace. We ask you to forgive our sin, then, through the sacrificial death of Jesus; and we ask you also to give us the guidance, power, and motivation we need to do better at living in your ways through the work of the Holy Spirit.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, and we pray together now, as he taught us:

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

### ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*This is how we know what love is:  
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us,  
and his blood purifies us from all sin.*

(1 John 3.16)

(1 John 1.7)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

### - **OT Reading:** Isaiah 58.1-9a - The kind of “fasting” that pleases God

In this reading, God, speaking through the prophet, rebukes the people of Israel for their insincere worship. That is, although they worship God correctly, they do not follow God’s law in the way they treat each other in everyday life.

### - **Psalm:** Psalm 146 - “Praise the LORD, my soul!”.

Psalm 146 is a psalm of praise, in which the writer celebrates God’s power, compassion, and faithfulness, and encourages people to put their trust in him.

Note in particular what the writer says about God’s care for people who vulnerable and powerless.

Notice as well that the psalm begins and ends with the words “Praise the LORD!”, which in Hebrew is “Hallelu Yah!”

### - **Letter Reading:** 1 John 3.16-18 - “Laying down one’s life” for others

This letter as a whole emphasizes the importance of love within the Christian community.

In this reading itself, the writer urges his readers to follow Jesus’ example of self-giving love.

### - **Third Reading:** Acts 10.1-8 - Cornelius: a charitable Gentile

This reading is the first part of the story of the conversion of a Roman soldier named Cornelius — a story that continues to the end of the chapter.

Notice in particular how Cornelius is portrayed.

**HYMN:** The church is wherever God’s people are praising

## **SERMON:** “Compassion and Generosity”

It’s hard to believe that this is already our ninth annual Soup Kitchen Sunday service! Fortunately, we’re able to hold it in person this year, rather than online; and we look forward to hearing from Shelly, Gloria, and Henry a little later on in the service.

The purpose of these services, of course, is to highlight the ministry of the Soup Kitchen — to acknowledge all the volunteers and donors who make this ministry possible, and to re-affirm annually that it’s a very worthwhile and appropriate ministry for our congregation to be involved in.

I say “ministry” because the word “ministry” actually means “service”, just as the word “minister” actually means “servant”. The Soup Kitchen, then, is a service to the low-income people of our community that offers them a free soup-and-sandwich lunch every weekday, as a way to help them get by on a low or even minimal income — although sometimes the meals are a bit more elaborate than just soup and a sandwich. As such, then, the Soup Kitchen is one service among several in our community that provide support and assistance to low-income

people.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of last year, the Soup Kitchen's pool of volunteers suddenly dried up, because the volunteers were all concerned about their safety. This was understandable, of course, since COVID was hitting older people particularly hard, and since the majority of our volunteers are retired people. This, then, forced the Soup Kitchen to close — and for much longer than we ever imagined. When things eased up in the summer and the early fall of last year, it looked as if we'd soon be able to re-open the Soup Kitchen. In fact, Shelly made plans for a partial re-opening — for three days a week — in the middle of November. But then the second wave of COVID hit us. The provincial government ordered a new partial lockdown, beginning just after Remembrance Day, and once again the pool of volunteers dried up. The Soup Kitchen then remained closed for another eight months, and was finally able to re-open fully in the middle of July, after the third wave had passed. It had been closed for nearly sixteen months — unprecedented in the Soup Kitchen's history.

It would be incorrect to say that the Soup Kitchen is our congregation's ministry exclusively, since, obviously, it is not. We didn't establish the Soup Kitchen; nor can we operate it on our own, since we don't have enough people or money to do so. So, we are part of a partnership of churches, community organizations, business, and individuals who all pitch in and contribute to the work that the Soup Kitchen does.

It's entirely appropriate that churches should be involved in a Soup Kitchen, since, in the Bible, there is a long-standing principle that those who have plenty should share some of what they have with those who don't have enough. Biblical writers in both the Old and New Testaments speak of God's concern for those who don't have enough. Old Testament writers frequently mention three groups of people in particular who are likely to live in poverty: foreigners, widows, and fatherless children — foreigners, because, as such, they are automatically at a disadvantage, unless they're wealthy to begin with; and widows and fatherless children, because in the ancient world, it was men who earned the family income. Today's psalm, Psalm 146, mentions all three groups when it says,

*The LORD watches over the foreigner,  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow.* (Psalm 146.9)

The books of the Old and New Testaments consistently portray God as having a special concern for the well-being of those who don't have enough.

In today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God responds to a complaint by the people that he doesn't respond to their religious rituals, specifically, fasting.

*“Why have we fasted,” they say,  
“and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?”* (Isaiah 58.3a)

Apparently, their expectation was that, if they fasted, God would do for them what they asked.

God's response is that there is something wrong with their fasting — not with the ritual *per se*, but with the other things they do while they fast, such as exploiting their workers, quarreling, and fighting. These behaviors taint their fasts, as it were. And so, God says,

*You can not fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.* (Isaiah 58.4b)

God then goes on to explain the kind of “fasting” that pleases him. In a series of rhetorical questions, he says,

*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice,  
and untie the cords of the yoke? ...  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry,  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter —  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?* (Isaiah 58.6-7)

Clearly, the behavior God that wants to see from the Israelites is compassion and generosity toward people who are unfairly treated and people in need. If they acted *that way*, God says, he *would* listen to their prayers.

In today's reading from the First Letter of John, John likewise urges his readers to share with those in need. Appealing to the example of Jesus, he says,

*This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions, and sees a brother or sister in need, but has no compassion for them, how can the love of God be in that person? ... Let us love not with words or speech, but with actions and in truth.* (1 John 3.16-18)

It's interesting that John uses the expression “to lay down one's life”. In referring to Jesus, he means his death on the cross, of course — as Jesus himself does in the Gospel of John. But in applying that expression to his readers, he means something else: sharing with those in need. His point, then, is that sharing with people in need is a kind of sacrifice — obviously not the same in magnitude as Jesus' sacrificial death, but a sacrifice in a smaller sense that nonetheless reflects Jesus' love and generosity.

And finally, in the reading from the Book of Acts, we're introduced to a Roman army officer named Cornelius — who turns out to become the first Gentile to come to faith in Jesus, and to receive the Holy Spirit. We read the end of this story once every three years, on Baptism-of-Jesus Sunday in January. But today we read the beginning of the story, in which Cornelius is introduced. Although he is a Gentile and an officer in the army that is occupying Israel, he is a worshiper of Israel's God. Luke, the writer, says of him, *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need, and prayed to God regularly* (Acts 10.2). Similarly, the angel who appears to Cornelius says to him, *Your prayers and gifts to the*

*poor have come up as a memorial offering before God* (Acts 10.4b). Not only his praying, then, but also his giving to those in need are pleasing to God; and they prompt God to choose him to be the first of many Gentiles in the Book of Acts to become a believer in Jesus and a member of the Christian community.

In our partnership in the Soup Kitchen, then, we follow in the tradition of Cornelius and so many others who have gone before us. Generosity to low-income people is one of the distinguishing features of a church that is faithful to the teachings of the scriptures. It reflects God's concern for people in need. It gives credibility to the church's ministry. And it expresses God's love and compassion in a visible and tangible way.

**HYMN:** Called as partners in Christ's service ...

## **SOUP KITCHEN SPEAKERS**

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Loving God, our Creator and Provider:

We acknowledge that everything we have comes from you, and we give you our thanks and praise. We thank you for providing the things we need, and we thank you for the privilege of sharing some of what you have given us with those who, for one reason or other, don't have enough.

Today we give you thanks in particular for the Soup Kitchen and for its ministry to low-income people in our community. Even though a free lunch per day is not a lot, we recognize that it is one service among others in the community that seek to give support and assistance to low-income people. We thank you for the many people who take part in the ministry of the Soup Kitchen, both volunteers and donors, and for their generosity. We thank you for those who give leadership in the Soup Kitchen, and pray for your continued blessing on them as they do the necessary work of organizing, scheduling, purchasing, and so many other tasks. We pray also for your blessing on each day's kitchen crew, as they prepare and serve the meal, and do the necessary setup and cleanup. We pray as well for those who come to eat at the Soup Kitchen. May the Soup Kitchen provide not only a nourishing lunch, but also hospitality and an opportunity for togetherness and fellowship. Grant your blessing to each one as they deal with various difficulties and stresses in their lives, and renew their strength day by day. May the ministry of the Soup Kitchen be seen as a very tangible way in which you care about people and provide for their needs.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are dealing with difficulties of various kinds; in particular, those whom we now name before you **in silence**:  
 \_\_\_\_\_. In your love and compassion, reach out to each one, we pray, to uphold them, and to give them your strength, guidance, encouragement, or healing, according to their needs.

We pray also for the needs of the world. As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we give thanks for what was accomplished at the United Nations conference on climate change, and we pray that there may be greater willingness than ever to follow up with decisive action. Give wisdom and courage to leaders around the world to institute the necessary policies to prevent climate change from getting worse, as well as to find ways to support those whose livelihoods will be negatively affected by those policies.

We pray for refugees in various parts of the world who long for the freedom, security, and prosperity that we ourselves so often take for granted. We pray especially today for refugees from the Middle East who find themselves stranded in Belarus, unable to cross into neighboring countries and make their way to their desired destinations in western Europe. May public attention on their plight cause the international community to respond with compassion, and relieve their suffering.

We continue to pray about the COVID-19 pandemic. As numbers again begin to increase here in Manitoba and other parts of the country, give our leaders wisdom and courage to take appropriate measures to minimize transmission of the virus, and to keep things from getting out of hand. Although we are all tired of the various restrictions, help us to appreciate how necessary they are, and give us strength to abide by them until the crisis is past, however long that takes.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

## **OFFERING**

### **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**

Gracious and generous God:

We give you thanks for the gifts we receive from you each day — food and shelter, love and fellowship, guidance and strength, encouragement and hope, healing and restoration.

Most of all, we thank you for reaching out to us in love, and offering us a place in your family, through the saving work of Jesus.

In gratitude, we now give back to you a portion of what you have given to us, to support and strengthen the ministry of your church in the world — including the ministry of the Soup Kitchen. May that work be pleasing to you, and may it help you to accomplish your gracious purpose in the world.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**HYMN:** Forth in thy name, o Lord, I go

## **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue showing compassion to those around you,

especially those in need.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to equip you for the tasks to which he calls you,

and to give you strength for each day's challenges;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.