

Immanuel United Church  
Feb 20th, 2022  
The 7th Sunday of Epiphany

Welcome

Call to Worship:

Where do we find you, Holy One, and how do we follow?

Find me at your table,

**We'll share your food**

Find me in your resources,

**We'll share your riches**

Find me in your power,

**We'll share your mercy**

Find me in your pain,

**We'll share your forgiveness**

Find me in your generosity,

**We'll share all, and expect nothing in return**

In community, seek my holiness,

**We follow you in love, generosity, joy**

In the world, share my desire:

**We follow you in justice, mercy, peace for all.**

Prayer:

**Holy One, you are deep within our world,  
calling us to join you in creating  
abundant life for all.**

**Open our hearts to recognize you**

**Free us to trust your call and follow;**

**Enable us to repent, and forgive,**

**and join in your work to make "all things new".**

**In Jesus' name we pray. Amen**

Hymn: MV 154 *Deep in Our Hearts*

Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even

your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.\* Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

Reflection: Jesus' "if" Questions...

*"If someone strikes you on the cheek, what will you do?"*

*"If someone takes away your coat, how would you respond?"*

*"If someone takes away your goods, what could be your response?"*

These past two years have been rough. We've had such a roller-coaster ride of good news and bad, that it's hard to know how to take this past week's news. The Manitoba government plans to lift its Covid-19 restrictions by March 15th. On March 1st, I will no longer need to show proof of vaccination when I enter the hockey arena with Jah-bi for practices and games. Soon, I will no longer have to tell the kids "Jah-bi, did you get your mask? Peace, find your mask in the laundry room!" before school every morning.

Personally, I do not have a full grasp of what lifting our protective mandates means. I just can't wrap my mind around all the possible aspects: political views, scientific data, economic concerns, mental health, versus the ongoing physical threat of Covid. I will continue to study the impacts of the pandemic and the continuance of certain restrictions for health care, elder care, and disability justice. One thing I have noticed is a general increase in anxiety - not only anxiety about physical health and safety issues, but anxiety about divisions in society, divisions between family members, friends,

neighbours and more. Consensus is hard to achieve in response to unprecedented questions. We are wrestling with many different kinds of “if” questions. The answers depend on how, in the present, we can work together without leaving others out, unheard, unsafe, and disrespected.

No single expert, group, or community’s opinions should be overvalued; they need to be laid down equally on the table, everyone’s equity held in mind. Of course, it sounds like an impossible task at this point. There seem to be so many voices, so many needs and wants. Some want to protect the most vulnerable – the immunocompromised and our elders. Some want to go back to ‘normal’, for a whole host of reasons. With conflicting goals comes anxiety.

As someone who came from a culture which puts the highest importance on harmony, unity, consensus, and collective identity, I wonder how, as members of Canadian society we, individually and communally, could respond to the pandemic-caused issues, to divisive political views and choices, in light of faith and the Gospel in our hearts and minds. I wonder if we can take the questions Jesus asks in the Gospel, apply them to our own situations and try to respond to each challenge from Jesus’s point of view.

Keeping that in mind, I would like to share three different points of view which I read in different articles this week.

The first one is from the Opinion column in the Winnipeg Free Press (date, the author). N says that “I’ve come to understand in politics, there are many divides in this county — English and French, Indigenous and non-Indigenous — the gulf between urban and rural may be among the most powerful. The so-called “freedom convoy” is a good case in point. Organizers have portrayed it as a protest against COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in general, and vaccine mandates in particular. In reality, this is a group of mostly (but not exclusively) rural protestors bringing their anger over a whole range of issues to bear on urban dwellers. ... There are quite a few obvious and unambiguous links between low vaccination rates, anti-vaccination activism and rural communities. There are city dwellers who don’t like mandates, but in some rural communities in southern Manitoba, not getting vaccinated is not just a decision, it’s a cause. Now that they’ve brought the fight to Canada’s biggest cities and most important border crossings, the results have been nothing short of absurd.”

Of course, these protestors are a vocal minority of the rural community; they do not represent everyone outside the cities. However, this article motivates me to understand the situation with a larger perspective, especially with my new awareness of the history of rural communities’ grievances against provincial and federal governments. As

someone who did not grow up in Canada, I would be willing to learn more about why and how certain grievances have grown among the citizens of rural communities.

On the other hand, I have been also reading about the deep concerns of parents with immunocompromised children, worried about sending them to school without masks. How frightening it is, especially as Covid is still very real “whether there is Covid fatigue or not.” A mother of two immunocompromised children says, “It still frightens me today like it did the first day of the pandemic because of kids’ illnesses.” The same concern is also shared among people with disabilities whose lives could be seriously affected by the early lifting of the mask mandates. The people in vulnerable communities feel even more alone and disconnected from society, as society decides to move on without considering those who are at most risk of severe illness or death by Covid.

Many feel that governments make “political decisions” rather than ones based on science. For example, Jason Kenney, the premier of Alberta said, on Feb 8th, “The threat of Covid-19 to public health no longer outweighs the hugely damaging impact of health restrictions on our society, on people’s mental health, on their emotional well-being, on our broader social health... So now is the time to begin learning to live with COVID.”

In this politically and socially divided world, it is reasonable that anxiety increases among us. The Omicron wave tosses us up and down - the waves of anxiety and divisiveness caused by different opinions, beliefs, needs, become even larger and wider. In such waves of anxiety, I hope that, as disciples of Jesus, we choose another option than the famous three F system: fight, flight and freeze, when we are stuck between a rock and a hard place. And the option I suggest is faith. Faith as the fourth F that counters the 3 Fs.

Two Sundays ago, I shared with you a reflection about God’s Logic (God’s Logic Game) and how we solve it. We need to know the clues and explore deductions. We are the Kingdom of God’s mystery problem-solvers, God’s logic game players, and God’s *sophia* singers. In the Gospel, Jesus shares clues/questions for us to use and deduce/explore faithful actions and the way of God (as in the parables that begin with “What the Kingdom of God would be like...”). Jesus wants us to wrestle with the questions he asks and deduce God’s logic, *logos* and *sophia*, in our heart and minds and actions, share what we have learned and witness it to the world, and in our lives.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is very intentional in asking *questions*. You might think you don’t really see questions in the text... Let’s break down each verse and convert them with a question mark. Jesus asks us to ponder, study, explore:

“If someone strikes you on the cheek, what will you do?”

“If someone takes away your coat, how would you respond?”

“If someone takes away your goods, what could be your response?”

“If someone curses you, ... If someone abuses you, ... If someone hates you, ...

Also, here are more obvious forms of questions he asks his disciples to ponder:

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?”

“If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?”

“If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?”

These questions are there for us to explore the clues about what the Kingdom of God would be like as our choice, as our action, as our faith. What would we deduce as God’s suggestion/ wisdom for us to learn and apply to our lives?

In the same Gospel reading, the good teacher Jesus spoon-feeds his disciples with answers too. The credited answers Jesus’ disciples are encouraged to study are:

Love your enemies.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Be merciful, just as the Creator is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.

Recently one grandmother came to her minister’s office and shared that the demands of the “Freedom Convoy” protestors are unacceptable. Freedom should always be linked with responsibility, not selfishness. Her grandson with a disability needed to regularly see his doctor. Isaac, 10 years old, fearlessly enjoys hockey and other sports, combatting the challenges caused by both disability and the prejudice of others. However, his appointments are often delayed – postponed, as the hospitals need to reserve the doctors and staff for accommodating the rocketing number of Covid patients.

God’s logic, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also” doesn’t mean that we should allow the demands of protestors and lifting of mandates to take away essential and necessary safety efforts, such as wearing masks in public places, work places, schools, from those whose lives would be at direct risk when those protocols are no longer enforced or required.

Jesus's command, "Love your enemy", is never meant to "be kind to evil" or "allowing a bully to hurt you." As God's *logos/sophia*, "Love your enemy", should be considered to be *mutual and reciprocal*. If the Others are "my enemy", it stands to reason that we are "their" Others. Therefore, *everyone* must "love their enemy"; Everyone, equally, mutually, and reciprocally, regardless of which political, personal, or spiritual positions each one takes, ought to "do to others, as we would have them do to us,": offer respect, protection, care, safety, and understanding. As much as "Love your enemy" sounds impossibly difficult, it remains as a question, more than an answer, for us to ponder and pray for. This commandment of God's is never for one party to take everything on themselves, a one-sided sacrifice, on behalf of the interest of others.

I believe that "Love your enemy" makes more sense when we understand that this impossible God-command is also given to the Others, which means, it is given to all parties, all of us. In other words, it also means that no one is essentially in or out of God's radical love. God's power of love dissolves boundaries, walls, apathy and hatred, and build a flowing river in the middle of the desert of divisions. (Which will be the theme of Lent in March at Immanuel.) This is the realm of faith, and the power of faith gives us the strength to fight the other 3 Fs: fight, flight, freeze, and be on top of covid-causing anxiety. Therefore, let's hope, Immanuel, together. Let's love mercy, act kindly, and walk humbly with God in faith, standing firmly on God's love, the fortitude of God's Kingdom of God logic: Love our God with all of ourselves. Love our neighbour as ourselves. And "Love our enemies", the nearly impossible but necessary bridge to build "abundant life for all", "justice and peace in harmony".

Hymn: VU 593 *Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love*

Offering:

MV 191 *What Can I Do?*

What can I do? What can I bring?  
What can I say? What can I sing?  
I'll sing with joy. I'll say a prayer.  
I'll bring my love. I'll do my share.

Prayer:

**Gracious God, you've lit the way and we've noticed the need.  
We offer our gifts that they may, in return, reflect your light and reveal your love.  
Amen.**

Prayers of the People:

Holy Mystery,  
beyond our understanding, our comprehension, our description,  
you are holy, holy, holy.  
You fill the spaces right beside your people, in our lives and in our world.  
You are holy, holy, holy.

In this third year of a pandemic,  
the continuing gloom of environmental crisis,  
the disturbing polarization of politics,  
the on-going economic, racial, and gender disparities.  
We need to see you and your beauty.

Wholly Presence, Wholly Love,  
We need to see you reveal yourself in moments of hope,  
when front-line workers tend to struggling souls,  
when someone dares to listen across the divide,  
when prophetic action addresses inequality,  
when one person says a kind or affirming or encouraging word to another hurting  
being.  
Reveal yourself and may the whole earth be full of your glory.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,  
but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,  
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,  
but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions,  
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,  
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind;

love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

Source of Love,

In the debates over easing restrictions,  
In this time of tragic border crossings,  
war atrocities,  
and slow-moving reconciliation,  
the world needs love.

Ground us in what is most important.

Hymn: VU 424 *May the God of Hope Go With Us*

Blessing & Sending Forth

**Send us into the world, O Holy One,  
Ready to witness to your generosity and forgiveness  
Ready to be recognized as those who follow your way  
Ready to shape a world of justice, peace, and joy.**