

Immanuel United Church
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Annual General Meeting
May 15th, 2022

Welcome

Call to Worship:

Easter joy is for you and for all.

Easter hope stirs in creation.

Let your spirit swell.

Let the borders of your compassion expand.

We join our voices and our lives to share this joy and hope
as we worship together.

Prayer:

O Holy One — we come, puzzling at your mystery, yet in adoration and wonder.

Creator God, we wonder at your mighty works.

O Holy One — we come in quiet breathing.

Spirit, we breathe in your gifts with gratitude.

O Holy One — we come in silent movements.

Beloved Christ, we follow you into the quiet space. Amen.

Hymn: VU 409 Morning Has Broken

**Morning has broken like the first morning,
blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!**

**Sweet the rain's new fall sunlit from heaven,
like the first dew fall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
sprung in completeness where God's feet pass.**

**Ours is the sunlight! Ours is the morning born of the one light Eden saw play!
Praise with elation, praise every morning, God's recreation of the new day!**

Scripture: John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in God's own self, and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

The Choir Anthem: *Surely the Presence*

Reflection: Listen with the ears of your heart (St. Benedict)

On a Winnipeg Harvest Monday, I was about to leave the sanctuary after greeting our volunteers at work when one of our members called me and asked if I had read a recent article from that week's Winnipeg Free Press. As a non-subscriber to the newspaper, I could read just the headline and the caption of the main picture on-line, but I was able to read another article about it from the United Church's own on-line magazine, Broadview.org. (Show the picture from Winnipeg Free Press and read the caption.) "Colleen Barbour, client care co-ordinator with the Manitoba MAiD team, said daughters Renee Sanguin and Lynda Sanguine-Colpitts 'moved mountains' to honour mother Betty Sanguin's wishes to have her medically assisted death administered at the church." Our Immanuel and Winnipeg Harvest member encouraged me, "Read it. It is beautiful." Broadview magazine interviewed the family a month later (April 29th), and reflected on it starting with the title, "Manitoba's first medically assisted death in a church was an 'intimate' ceremony: Betty Sanguin spent her last day with family and friends at Churchill Park United." Let me read this from Broadview for you, even if I am sure some of you may have already had the time to read and reflect on it. Please share your thoughts with..

"At around noon on March 9, Betty Sanguin arrived at her church, Churchill Park United in Winnipeg, on a stretcher. The moment we rolled her in... and sat her up in her recliner, she lit up like a Christmas Tree," ... Renee, one of Sanguin's daughters recalls. "I hadn't seen that much life in her eyes, so much joy in a long time. And honestly, I think part of it was just being in the church." But this was no ordinary church service. Sanguin chose to die in the sanctuary that day. Last spring, Sanguin was diagnosed with ALS. And when she decided to access medical assistance in dying (MAiD), she wanted the procedure to happen at her church. Churchill Park United's leadership team unanimously approved her request, and on March 9, the 'crossing-over' ceremony took place in the church's sanctuary. This was the first MAiD procedure to take place in a

church in Manitoba. Sanguin could no longer talk, so she used a whiteboard to communicate. When she was settled in her recliner, she wrote: "Welcome to my special day. I love you all so much."

Sanguin's children had worked hard to make the big space feel intimate. In the end, it was almost as if they were in her living room. There was a recliner for Sanguin to sit in, an area rug, a lamp, and a collection of family photos. Many of the quilts that Sanguin had made over the years were on display. The chairs were set up in what another one of her daughters described as a "circle of care". The six chairs immediately surrounding Betty were for her six children; the next tier was for husbands, wives and grandchildren; and the final tier was for friends. During the ceremony, two of Sanguin's grandchildren sang "Let Your Light Shine on Me" and everyone joined for "How Great Thou Art." Sanguin waved her arms along to the music. ... "There was an opportunity for every single person who wanted to come and hold her hand and tell her they loved her and say good bye," says Renee. "It was very touching and very intimate." Afterwards, the minister offered a blessing. Each of Betty's six children placed their hands on her as the minister invited Sanguin to go in peace. Eventually, everyone was asked to leave the sanctuary and Sanguin met with the MAiD team. After giving her final consent, the procedure took place. Sanguin's six children returned to the sanctuary and stayed with her until the end. "That part was harder," said Sanguin-Colpitts. "We just stood around her and we cried, we laughed, we did everything." ... The decision to end her life was not an easy one for Sanguin. "She grappled with her faith... How do we know when our soul is ready? Will her soul be ready to cross over?" Renee says. ...

While much of the response to the crossing-over ceremony has been positive, there have been exceptions. The minister has received messages telling her that the church should close their doors and that they should be ashamed of their actions. What the minister finds hard to describe to these critics is "the sense of 'rightness'" and the overwhelming presence of spirit during the ceremony. She was also surprised that many critics were most offended by the procedure taking place in the church, instead of the procedure itself. "It's good for any congregation to discern: What do we believe about our space? Is it more sacred than other spaces? What is the purpose of the sanctuary?", the minister says. "Who is allowed in it, and what can happen in it? For other congregations asked to consider a service of crossing-over, knowing their congregation's position on their space will be quite important." More than a month after her mother's death, Sanguin-Colpitts reflects on the experience: "Was it any less sad? No, was it any less tragic? No," she says. "Was it any less heartbreaking? No. But was it the most beautiful and humane and compassionate way to die? Yes." That is the end of the article.

I chose to share the full text of the article with you with the hope that it can foster our reflections on significant topics in our lives, both individually and as a church community. First, many health and spiritual care experts, therapists, theological thinkers and others agree that “The more it’s [death and dying] talked about, the more dying gets reintegrated into daily life.” “In Western culture, we don’t talk about death freely.” (Broadview, June 2022) So... what are your thoughts, feelings, reflections on death and dying? How is death and dying in light of life and living integrated/embraced, or not, into your daily life, into your context of faith, life, understanding of Easter?

The second question for us to ponder can be... as the choir sings this morning, “Surely the presence of God is here in this place, and with us.” ... that it would be valuable and meaningful for us to discern, not only in terms of imagining MAiD to take place in this space, but also in general, in light of justice, outreach, faith and community, “What is the purpose of the sanctuary/space/building? What can happen in it?”

A third question for us to ponder can be about vision and mission of the church, especially today as we will continue to gather for the annual meeting to think about and make important decisions about the life of ministry here and with us at Immanuel. How does the cross and Easter of Jesus die with us, and resurrect with us, as we worship and work together as the body of Christ?

Whatever we do, regardless of where we (believe) are at, the most important thing, according to many who have worked in this field, or have journeyed deeply with and alongside their loved one who has chosen to end their life, is to *listen*. Listen to the needs of the dying, or those who intentionally choose to cross over. Dr. Linda J. Ormson, a registered nurse, who worked in palliative and long-term care, and then embraced a second career in chaplaincy work in hospital, hospice, and elder-care facilities, says “In the current Canadian context, there remains a gap in our understanding of the needs of the dying. We are a society of speakers and talkers, but rarely listeners, especially when it comes to actively listening to those at end of life. To add to this, we are afraid of loss and afraid to face the earthly reality of death, and therefore, we miss out on those precious conversations with those who are in need of sharing what is most urgent on their minds. Conversations with people who are actively dying can be challenging for professional clergy, chaplains, and family members. So often in my experience, I have witnessed family members and professionals gathered around their dying loved one, chatting about everything from sports events to political views — any topic other than the most important one right before them. This uncomfortable “elephant in the room” is often foreign to families due to their limited experience and the cultural taboos around death. The dying person and their families often look to clergy and chaplains for

guidance. When a teaching moment presents itself, do take every opportunity to help guide family members through this landscape of loss. The goal and focus for anyone visiting the dying should be, in the words of St. Benedict, “to listen with the ears of your heart.”

In John 13, Jesus is having his last supper with his disciples before he is crucified on the cross. The farewell meal is the setting where Jesus washes the disciples’ feet and identifies his betrayer. Then comes today’s reading of Jesus giving his disciples a new commandment, to love one another. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another,” says Jesus, “just as I have loved you.” (v. 34) With this charge, Jesus urges us to love as God loves us. Quite honestly, without God’s grace, we are not able to completely carry out this love on our own. Our inability to love one another as Jesus mandates should move us to humbly and courageously rely on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. After all, God desires us to take part in, and therefore, God desires God self to take part in the “new command” in collaboration with us, God’s children, God’s creation, and to engage in self-emptying love. V. 33. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the others so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’” (v. 33) Jesus’ words like this is demonstrated / “glorified” (v. 32) through Jesus’ life and death on the cross, and he charges us, his disciples, friends, companions, to love one another through the Holy Spirit, baptizing one another in the spirit of unconditional love, especially by (symbolically) washing their feet with the pure water of healing, love and affirmation. V. 35, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Hymn: VU 282 *Long Before the Night*

**Long before the night was born from darkness.
Long before the dawn rolled unsteady from fire.
Long before she wrapped her scarlet arms around the hills
there was a love this ancient love was born.**

**Long before the grass spotted green the bare hillside. Long before a wing
unfolded to wind. Long before she wrapped her long blue arm around sea...**

**Long before a chain was forged from the hillside. Long before a voice uttered
freedom’s cry. Long before she wrapped her bleeding arms around a child...**

**Long before the name of God was spoken.
Long before a cross was nailed from a tree.
Long before she laid her arm of colours ‘cross the sky...**

**Wakeful are our nights and slumbers our morning.
Stubborn is the grass sowing green wounded hills.
As we wrap our healing arms to hold what her arms held
this ancient love this aching love rolls on.**

Offering:

**Revitalizing God, transform our gifts with your immense love, so that they
may make a difference to anyone in need in our world. Transform our hearts,
so that we worship joyfully and give generously.
Transform our lives, that we may affirm your grace in everyone we encounter.
Amen.**

Prayers of the People

Hymn: VU 359 *He Came Singing Love*

**He came singing love and he lived singing love;
he died singing love. He arose in silence.
For the love to go on we must make it our song; you and I be the singers.**

**He came singing faith...
He came singing hope...
He came singing peace...**

Commissioning and Benediction:

**Surely God is in this place!
Help me notice!
We have noticed.
We have discovered.
We have understood.
We have moved from shadows into sunlight!
Hearts have been strangely warmed.
May the news of Christ's rising live deep within us,
each and every day.**

Amen

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