

Welcome

Good morning, I am excited to be with you today, together in mind and heart and in the Spirit. Today is mission awareness Sunday, and I will speak to you about the ministry that I began almost five years ago – a mission called Cornerstone, here in our Presbytery of Niagara. It has, with my ordination in January of 2020, become an official mission of the Presbytery – something you can all be proud of and also consider supporting especially with prayer and possibly financially as well. Here is fair warning that today's sermon has some difficult parts to it. I hope it doesn't overly stir up your own painful memories.

Call to Worship – Psalm 13

¹How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

³Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

⁴and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

⁵But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

Opening Prayer Let us pray, together in spirit:

Heavenly Father and Mother of us all, creator, sustainer, redeemer, and friend. We call you mighty Lord, loving shepherd, master healer, and Lord of life. All of creation is yours, and we cling to you and your promises in this life, and we hope for the future in eternity with you. We praise you for your goodness, for all of the gifts you have given us. We thank you for the sunshine and the rain that grows our food. We thank you for the minerals and resources of this planet that allow us to build, create, and flourish. Thank you for intelligence of many different kinds, gifts of talents for art and music, poetry, construction and design, and all other creative endeavours.

Though you had intended all of your lavish gifts for us to use for the good of our communities, we admit that we have often used them for selfish gain. Where you give freely, we charge money, or allegiance, or return favours. We often do what we do primarily for our own benefit. In the meantime, the earth is plundered, and its beauty is compromised. Nature struggles to survive, never mind thrive. Though the pandemic has slowed our collective madness a little, have we learned our lessons? May it be so, oh Lord. Remind us as often as needed of the way of life as Jesus lived – not for himself, but for the good of others. Help us to do the same. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jesus has forgiven us our sins through his death and resurrection. For all who believe, repent and your sins are forgiven, praise be to God!

As God's forgiven people, let us pray in one voice, one mind and one heart the words Jesus taught: The Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Scripture Reading – John 4: 4-26

⁴Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

Cornerstone: A mission of the Presbytery of Niagara

Before I begin, I need to tell you that what I am about to say is at times hard to hear. It is the stuff of life for many people. It may trigger memories in you that lie buried by years. I pray that you will not be tormented by these difficult stories. So let's begin:

I have felt God's call to mission since my teens. I had a lengthy training period – first becoming a mechanical engineer, though I'm not sure how that training fits in except that I needed an undergraduate degree, and then twenty years as a mom to six children. Following that, there were 5 years in seminary at Knox College, from which I graduated with an M.Div. that brings me to the summer of 2015. Then I started seeking a call to a church, though in my heart it didn't feel right. I was still feeling called to mission, though that had been refined to a call to inner-city mission, which I foolishly didn't think existed in a small town like Dunnville.

While I was still looking for congregational ministry, God closed door after door, and graciously opened a different door. That September, I asked to do some volunteer work at the local pregnancy and family center – a place where I had helped out in the past. Only this time, I asked to work more directly with clients. I was hired on the spot. Two months later, I attended a **workshop** on planting non-traditional churches – a workshop I hadn't even signed up for. While I was sitting there and learning, it became more and more clear to me that this was what God was calling me to do at the pregnancy center in Dunnville.

It wasn't long after this workshop on church planting that I shared what I had learned at work and at my local church. I found a lot of support from the church in the way of volunteers to provide dinner and childcare and from the pregnancy center to provide the connections to families in need and the physical space. And thus, one warm June evening in 2016, the ministry that is called Cornerstone held its first gathering. A 34-year-old dream had become reality! I was a missionary at last.

At first, I had very little idea what to do. Every step forward was a step into the dark. But as I began to notice a pattern of things working out, I began trusting more and more that this community that was forming was within God's will.

Reflecting the learnings from my MDiv, the bi-weekly pre-Covid Cornerstone gatherings are very loosely structured like a typical order of a Presbyterian church service, though if you came to visit, you might not recognize it as that. We began each evening that we gathered with lighting a candle and the kids reminding us all that Jesus is the light of the world and that he is present among us. Then I talk with God on behalf of all present. Then I sit on the floor and invite the children to join me for a story that introduces the topic for the evening. Then we sing and praise God with contemporary music. Then we pray some more, say the Lord's Prayer, and usually someone, often a child, volunteers to say grace before dinner. Then we break bread together, a meal that has been lovingly prepared by a team of church volunteers. While we eat, we pass around a microphone and everyone shares a thorn and a rose. Afterwards I lift these joys and sorrows up to the Lord. This is our prayer of thanksgiving and intercession. After some dessert, the children go and play with supervision, and the adults gather for a discussion where any and all questions are honoured and discussed. At the end of two hours, I send everyone home with God's blessing.

Over time, I added pastoral counselling to my mandate. I was helping mostly women sort out difficulties in their lives, whether it was from past trauma, broken relationships, a rough childhood, abuse, grief, you know, all those

things where wise counsel would make a difference. It was an eye-opening journey and I learned a lot every day. I was also able to help, at least sometimes. And so Cornerstone continued and grew.

I have been part of our national church's initiative called Cyclical PCC, a support group for church planting pioneers, for over two years. This provides me with a coach, training, and a cohort of *Presbyterian* Pioneers – which is not as much an oxymoron as it was 10 years ago!

In the fall of 2019, I was asked to leave the pregnancy center after four years of steady and committed service, over a difference in theology. It wasn't an easy time for me, but in hindsight, it was good and necessary. The way I understand God to have been working in this is that Cornerstone needed a safe, nurturing place to begin its journey – kind of like an egg in an incubator, letting the tiny chick embryo grow in an ideal environment. But when an egg hatches, the chick needs to get out of the incubator and into the world. Cornerstone needed to get out of this center and into the town proper. So then, until COVID happened, Cornerstone met in the church basement, and individual counseling happened anywhere – the church, my house, their house, the park, or a coffee shop.

I know God is at work and things will keep changing. That feels like yikes and hurrah at the same time a lot of the time. Then COVID proved this loud and clear. Cornerstone continued online, though late in the evening when the little ones were sleeping. Cornerstone also continued on front porches. I began a weekly colouring contest early in April, asking people to print out a page I sent out on Facebook, and then posting a photo of the finished artwork. Little did I know that most people didn't have a printer. That had me delivering copies every Saturday morning, which created opportunity for porch visits on a weekly basis. Late last summer, we resumed gathering outdoors at my farm around a campfire. But the fall weather soon made that uncomfortable, and the practises of this ministry keep changing.

Many of these families that come to Cornerstone live in subsidized housing and receive other social assistance. For many people at the bottom of the socio-economic system, there's little hope, long wait lists, and lots of company in the struggle of life, mostly through no fault of their own. On top of that, Dunnville is definitely underserved for support services. Most services require an hour's drive, which is a mighty challenge when you can't afford gas or don't own a car. God draws these families, calls them, whispers to them, leaves comments for them on Facebook, entices them to learn at first *about* Him, and then *from* Him. It is amazing to be a part of these journeys!

But the struggle is real. What I will share now is a small, painful sampling of those whom I have journeyed with. Some women, as a child, lived in a home with at least one alcoholic parent. Some children grew up in a home where the parents were physically abusive with each other. Having been born to a prostitute. Having grown up in a home where the child was physically or emotionally abused or neglected. Where you were witness to the abuse or even murder of a sibling. Where sexual abuse happens by family members or strangers at any age. An abusive boyfriend who had stabbed a woman and left her for dead. These are true stories I have been told. These are the wounded heroes I work with. I wish I could tell you these things are rare, but statistics claim one in four people is abused. I am convinced reality is considerably higher. One woman didn't see her childhood as abusive until we dug into it and brought to light the many reasons why she struggled with depression and suicidal ideation for so much of her adult life.

Trauma such as what these women experienced causes *physiological* changes in the human brain, some of which are permanent. I have learned that trauma results from *how events were perceived* by a person. So a bomb scare might cause trauma in one person but not another. Everyone responds in their own unique way. This means that you can't tell someone to get over something just because *you* can.

Trauma often leads to substance dependence – addiction in other words. I would wager that every single person in addiction has experienced trauma. Under the influence of mood-altering drugs is the one time during a painful existence that the emotional pain is relieved. It makes a lot of sense to seek relief. But the cost is high, as you well know.

There are many coping mechanisms traumatized people turn to, but very few of them are healthy in the long run. The trauma generally doesn't go away by itself; it generally only gets buried. Sometimes it rears its ugly head as PTSD, or as repeated cycles of failed relationships. Sometimes trauma results in depression or anxiety, or feeling numb and emotionless, sometimes addictions to alcohol, food, drugs, shopping, and sometimes, death by suicide.

And so, I am called and privileged to journey with these women. The journey is never easy *or* quick. It is often painful, difficult, surprising, challenging, but ultimately God works his healing miracle. In a way, I am not so much a shepherd to sheep, as claimed by one metaphor for pastors, and this is what makes Cornerstone different from a more traditional church. My role is much more like a veterinarian than a shepherd. Whereas a shepherd can look after a generous size flock of reasonably healthy sheep, what I do in this ministry is more like the work of a veterinarian in intensive care. A veterinarian takes in wounded, sick animals and spends very concentrated and therefore more costly efforts towards their well-being. A veterinarian can look after only a few sheep at a time because their care is more intense. And when a sheep is well on its way to recovery, this sheep can then join the care of a shepherd in a larger herd.

So Cornerstone is truly a mission. It offers an introduction to Jesus, to God, to who God is and how God works (as in, not like a genie that grants wishes, or smites people for j-walking). Cornerstone also helps explain why God matters in the 21st century. One family was baptized last summer. Others have started going to church, some at the Presbyterian Church, others elsewhere. Some have started reading the Bible. Through Cornerstone, lives are changing and people are connecting with God and finding healing and hope.

The woman at the well that we just read about in John's Gospel is not unlike the women that come to Cornerstone. She's female – obviously. That fact alone puts her at a significant disadvantage. She is from the other side of the tracks – a Samaritan. She's a little like the people of our day where Christendom lingers like a faint memory. The Samaritan woman is thirsty – for water from the well, and also for the living water that Jesus offers. Today in Dunnville and everywhere, people seek meaning and wholeness in life. They are also thirsting for the living water whether they realize it or not.

The Samaritan woman is an untouchable, an outcast, someone that everyone ignores or talks about, but never to. We might not realize the significance of Jesus' words, "Will you give me a drink?" Jesus is talking to an outcast, accepts her, and invites her into relationship. She can't believe her ears. Today, what women like her tend to hear are messages like, "Welfare bum. Free loader. Addict. Slut. Go get a job. Get over it. Just *stop* smoking, drinking, or doing drugs!"

Those are not the words that cross Jesus' lips. He invites this woman into relationship. He offers *this* woman, a woman who is shunned by her peers, her neighbours, by five previous men, a woman who is likely the talk of the town – Jesus offers *this woman* salvation!

So my big question for us today is this: who are the people in our lives who stand in need of forgiveness, in need of the Gospel, and in need of salvation? The Samaritan woman was considered absolutely untouchable for a Jewish man like Jesus, but Jesus does not care about the human constructs of who is in and who is out. He sees a beloved child of God, made in the creator's image. Who are the untouchable people in your life? The poor, the homeless, the uneducated, the unwashed? People of colour, LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees? Sikhs, Muslims, or atheist? Or is it your estranged child, your co-worker, your elderly parent, your ex-best friend who dumped you?

In this gospel story of the Samaritan woman, Jesus gives us a most *exciting*, most *challenging* example of how to live. He has a conversation with an outcast who personally feels like they deserve nothing because they have messed up so many times, and he treats her like a most beloved person. Jesus is completely open with her. He doesn't hold back just because she is different. All he did to start the conversation is ask for a drink of water. It's not complicated. And yet it is so challenging for us.

When you engage people with love, listen deeply, do not try to fix them, but try to understand them, be *with* them and *for* them. Then you are on the right track. God is the healer. Lead people to him. Be willing, courageous, and loving disciples.

And when you go out with fear and trepidation, know that God is with you. Know that people will misunderstand you when you talk with Samaritan women, or prostitutes, or people in addictions. Know that this isn't necessarily going to be a popular pastime with your partner, your friends, maybe even your church. But please, when you get heat for loving people the way Jesus loved this Samaritan woman, remember the religious elites of Jesus' day. They didn't approve of what the Son of God was doing either. May God bless you in your efforts. Amen.

Hymn # 740

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord
And where there's doubt, true faith in You

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness, ever joy

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of Your peace

It is pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life

Our Offerings:

You are able to make your offering by sending a **cheque or using the PAR** (pre-authorized remittance). For Rockway contact Bonnie Roland (905-685-3985), 213 Rykert Street, St. Catharines, ON L2S 2B5 and for North Pelham contact Janice Aulph (905-892-5244) or mail 602 Metler Rd, Fenwick L0S 1C0 or drop them in the mailbox.

Prayer of Dedication: Loving and gracious God, you have given your most precious gift to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, your son. Through faith in Him, we are adopted as sons and daughters and share in the inheritance of eternal life with you. In gratitude, we give what we can to join in the kingdom building activities that you are accomplishing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Bless our hearts, our efforts, and all kingdom building work here on earth. May the Good News of salvation spread to all people. We pray in the name of the risen one, amen.

Closing Prayer

Loving and compassionate God, you made all of us in your image, you care for us deeply, and we are grateful for you. Life here on earth can be a mess, but you give us so many good things: birds that sing, food and water that nourishes, relationships that nurture and grow us; you have given us the Holy Scriptures to study and learn from. You have given us life, from our first breath to our last, and then in eternity with you. Thank you!

Things here on earth can be a little hellish, as you well know. The corona virus has changed our lives in so many ways. It has been hard – not only for those of us who caught the virus, but also for those who haven't been out of our home in months, who haven't seen family or friends. It is hard for those who lost jobs or businesses. It is hard for single moms who have had many months without a single hour of rest from caring for their children and their households. You have made us resilient, Lord, but sometimes, it feels like the breaking point is near. Lord, give us people in our lives that are safe to confide in, that are able to offer hope and help. Lord, grant wisdom to our politicians to keep us healthy, safe, and sane.

Lord of all time and space, we pray for the future. It is true that it is in your hands, that you are in control, and yet, we ask that in these uncertain times of tremendous change, we might live well, seek you, and choose our next steps wisely.

We pray for the families who struggle on social assistance, those who struggle with depression and other forms of mental illness. We pray for those who care for the struggling, for that is also a real struggle at times. We pray for those in hospital, those who are home alone, those who seek you, and those who have never considered you as worth considering. Draw all people into your lap, into the shelter of your wings, Oh God, where we may experience your saving grace and unending love.

In Jesus' powerful name we pray. Amen.

Charge, Benediction

Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak and help the suffering; honour all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord be kind and gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favour and give you peace.