# God Calls Us to Be TransformedA Worship Service for Black History Month

*This service, written for Black History Month by a White ally, invites the congregation into a place of discomfort and transformation. We celebrate important people and events in the history of the African diaspora, while recognizing that this history had been one of struggle after struggle.*

## Words of Welcome

From places familiar and places as yet unseen, you are welcome here

From places of work and of pleasure, you are welcome here

From celebration and triumph, you are welcome here

From despair and lamentation, you are welcome here

From near and far away, you are welcome here

From stillness and from chaos, you are welcome here

From noise and confusion, you are welcome here

From solitude and isolation, you are welcome here

From mountain tops triumphant, you are welcome here

From the low places of dread, you are welcome here

From the absence of God’s touch, you are welcome here

From the intimacy of God’s heart, you are welcome here

You are welcome into this place of reflection and response

Experience God’s call and be transformed!

## Opening Hymn

VU 625 “I Feel the Winds of God”

## Territorial Acknowledgement

We gather and make our homes on land which has been the ancestral home of Indigenous nations, whose identity is integrated with the earth and water beneath our feet. In this area, the land is the historical territory of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. May we keep them in our hearts and minds as we move through this worship time together.

*(For more on territorial acknowledgements, search “acknowledging the territory” on* [*united-church.ca*](http://www.united-church.ca)*.)*

## Prayer

Let us pray:

**God of all peoples, you are our compass and our GPS.**

**We are grateful for the gifts of our lands and waters and all the resources they produce,**

**for the sciences and arts, for our ongoing discoveries and creations.**

**Help us to treat the bounty of this earth with responsibility and compassion.**

**Help us to ensure that your endless gifts to us are shared equally, to the benefit of all.**

**Teach us the holiness of giving, and the entrapments of selfishness and fear.**

**Give us eyes to experience the world as you do, and the will to transform this earth into your dream.**

**We ask these things in humility and trust, through Jesus Christ our friend and companion. Amen.**

## Scripture

Luke 18:9–14 The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

## Reflection

How do we choose a life of discomfort? *Why* would we choose a life of discomfort? How do we seek peace and happiness in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones, but also obey the biblical call “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8)? Those short words are easy to repeat; we hear them often in church and social justice circles. But what do they mean? And how do they apply today?

This is Black History Month, a time set aside to celebrate important people and events in the history of the African diaspora (the dispersion of a people from their original homeland). This history doesn’t generally receive attention in schools or churches, which is why a month is set aside by many countries across the world. The challenge in this educational effort is that there are many things to honour and celebrate, but the overall story of those of African heritage is not a happy one. In fact, the story has been one of struggle after struggle after struggle. The end of slavery took a very long time. And in fact, slavery is resurfacing as a problem in parts of the world where governments have fallen apart. Slavery has legally ended in most of the world, but the drift back to slavery is still in the interest of people in power. It is a problem faced by people who are disenfranchised – who are very often people of colour.

The Pharisee in today’s story is commonly interpreted as a wealthy, self-important villain, interested in the gains of his faith more than an honest relationship with God. As a matter of fact, when reading most gospel stories that refer to Pharisees, they are often presented as the foils of Jesus, ones who often tried to trap him with religious arguments and who even led the movement that led to his death. But there is real danger in this simple interpretation of the Pharisees, who followed the Torah faithfully, were social and religious leaders, and provided stability under Roman occupation.

This Pharisee does not do anything wrong religiously. He names his pattern of religious practice. He tithes generously. And because of this, he sees himself as being above those who don’t. I often hear the same conversation when discussing issues of racism. People who never contributed to Black oppression don’t understand why they should have any responsibility for repairing it. People whose ancestors chose to move to North America don’t see why they should have to be involved in reparations to Indigenous nations. Men who don’t hold to misogynist behavior or views don’t see why they should have to be part of women’s movements.

The truth is that we are all recipients of the legacies of our ancestors. Their belief systems, their actions, their choices or lack of choice led to the current *you*. You did not begin with a clean slate. You are the inheritor of history. If you are of Western European descent, there is an excellent chance that your ancestors owned slaves or benefited from the slave trade. Your family may have chosen to reject this barbaric institution, or legislation may have caused them to stop owning slaves. It doesn’t really matter. The most insidious form of racism today is not the overtly hateful KKK, White supremacist, alt-right, open agenda racism. It’s the kind of racism that is experienced in the education system, in hospitals, in beauty salons, in worship, in the job market. It’s the quieter, polite racism, the subtle nuances in systems that becomes the background to our daily lives. So we accept things the way they are. I know that I am racist, sexist, and homophobic, because I live in North America and these things are in the air we breathe. My responsibility as a Christian is to look into my life and see what separates me from God. This requires deep personal honesty.

And what does Jesus expect of us? In the film *The Matrix*, the character Neo is offered two pills, a red and a blue one. Eating the blue pill means accepting the status quo as it currently stands, sinking into the comfort of his daily life without question. Taking the red pill means rejecting what he has been taught and seeking the deeper truth. This is where Jesus calls us. He tells us that the Pharisee in the story isn’t doing anything wrong, but he is certain of his own goodness. The tax collector, on the other hand, assumes nothing; he only asks to be able to accept God’s judgment. Being open to God’s touch means letting go of the control we have over our lives. It means accepting the risk of God’s mission for us. It means letting go of the safe, comfortable womb we build for ourselves and letting God lead us where we need to go. Jesus wants us to be transformed. Jesus wants us to seek out what is unjust, what is painful, what is uncomfortable.

Jesus wants us all to say “Black Lives Matter”—because they do. And if we struggle with saying that, we have a problem. A ship in harbour may be safe, but—as a favourite quote from John A. Shedd puts it— “that is not what ships are built for.” So where are you planning to sail?

## Litany

God of our blood, God of earth and air and water,
we thank you for the good news we have experienced in Jesus Christ.

We thank you for the teachings that continue to inspire and challenge us
as we find relevance in your words from over the centuries.

You call us to be priestly in the good news of love and salvation.

You call us to be prophetic in the naming personal and corporate sin.

We are conflicted in our hearts and minds – your justice comes with cost,
and sometimes the cost is difficult for us to bear.

Give us the will to silence the cacophony that drowns out your voice.

Give us the wisdom to see through the deception in our media and institutions.

Give us the nerve to resist the pressure to join popular beliefs that go against your values.

Help us to participate in your call to justice by knowing when to listen…by knowing when to speak…by knowing when to act…by knowing when to support…by knowing when to denounce…by knowing when to grieve…by knowing when to rejoice.

In Christ’s name we pray. **Amen.**

## Prayers of the People

God of the nations, you bless us in creation with endless diversity. May we participate in this ongoing creation by enabling life in ongoing variety and expression. Help us to see what is acceptable.

**Spirit of Love, receive our prayer.**

God of the political, you give us free will to govern and manage our community living. May we choose our leaders wisely by changing patterns and voices in leadership, so that all needs are being addressed.

**Spirit of Love, receive our prayer.**

God of anger, you rage at the choices we make on earth even as we claim to do your will. May we learn to see ourselves with clarity, and learn to feel the rage you feel when we treat people, the earth and its creatures with contempt and disrespect.

**Spirit of Love, hear our prayer.**

God of the intimate, you speak to us in whispers and shouts, and it is up to us to pay attention. May we turn our attention to you, especially when it is painful, because we know love means having to make sacrifices.

**Spirit of Love, hear our prayer.**

## Offertory Music

VU 427 “To Show by Touch and Word”

## Offertory Prayer

Loving God, we are your hands and feet on this earth. We turn to you now with humble gifts and prayers, knowing that this offering is not enough to heal the wounds upon the earth, but knowing that they are the symbols of what we are able to do collectively as the people of God. May we allow ourselves to be transformed by these gifts and may we turn yet another corner in creating the world you intended for us all.

## Closing Music

VU 87 “I Am the Light of the World”

## Benediction

As you leave this place, remember the words of Paul: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

## Sending Forth

May God bless you and keep you.

May God’s face shine upon you

And be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

*from* Celebrate God’s Presence *(UCPH, 2000), p. 71; based on Numbers 6:24–26*

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