
WORSHIP COMPANION

A collection of voices and resources to guide homebound worship amidst the global pandemic.

August - September 2020

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Prior to Pentecost this year I was talking to a friend about the church's ability to continue its work amidst the challenging times at hand. The very real threat of COVID19 had most, if not all, the churches in Ohio relegated to online arenas on Sunday mornings, and seeking to extend their virtual footprint to offer words of hope, gospel, and guidance to all who are seeking.

I suggested that Pentecost this year would mirror the familiar account in Acts when the church spoke in tongues to communicate the gospel. We may not be speaking the languages that the Apostles did, but now the church would be learning how to communicate through Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. My friend said he thought Pentecost would mirror the New Testament story in a different way. He suggested it would be a beautiful example of the church learning how to work together in new ways, and creating a new sense of self, which has not been done on this scale since Luke's account in Acts.

In truth, Pentecost this year was both of these things, a time of speaking in new ways, and working together in unprecedented ways to establish a new sense of church. For those where I serve, we began a series of touchless food drives, encouraging parishioners to drive by the church and drop off canned goods for the local food pantry. We also worked closely with a brewery and a food truck in our neighborhood to offer a free community meal program from our parking lot. The positive engagement of parishioners & community partners began to show us that worship could happen from our homes, as new ministries were blooming outside the building.

However, there are many who cannot join current online expressions of the church because of insufficient internet, lack of computer ownership, or other technological issues. This forces us to ask the question, how does the church continue to speak, and reach out, to those on the other side of the internet divide?

What you have before you is an offering to the church during this time of shifting, growing, and recalibrating. The goal is simple; to provide words of hope, gospel, and guidance to any who may be seeking them in a printable form.

Within these pages is a complete order of worship for each Sunday from August 2nd (the 9th Sunday After Pentecost) through November 22nd (Christ The King). There is a Call To Worship, Prayer of the Day, Reading(s), Sermon, Prayers of Intercession, the Lord's Prayer, Thanksgiving for the Word, and Closing prayer for every Sunday.

These prayers, sermons, and other parts of worship have been contributed by a wonderful and diverse group of people I have the pleasure to call peers, colleagues, and most of all friends. By contributing their time and efforts, we have created this Worship Companion that is not limited or restricted by copyright or publication laws. Our hope is that this resource be shared with all seeking connection, hope, and the gospel during these isolating and challenging times.

Rev. Daniel W. Hille
Eighth Week After Pentecost, 2020

SERMONS

August 2, 2020

Rev. Eric Wooldridge, Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church, Enumclaw, WA

August 9, 2020

Rev. Jason Chesnut, Itinerant Preacher and Teacher, Delaware-Maryland Synod, Baltimore, MD

August 16, 2020

Rev. Bob Abrams, Assistant to the Bishop, Southern Ohio Synod

August 23, 2020

Rev. Matthew Kamprath, Pastor, First Lutheran Church, Geneseo, IL

August 30, 2020

Rev. Paul Jones Moody, Pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church, Cleveland, OH

September 6, 2020

Rev. M. Jill King, Pastor, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Durham, NC

September 13, 2020

Rev. Justin Thornburg, Pastor, Emerson Avenue Baptist Church, Indianapolis, IN

September 20, 2020

Rev. Daniel W. Hille, Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, OH

September 27, 2020

Rev. Jocelyn Johnston, Interim Pastor, St. John Lutheran Church, North Versailles, PA

October 4, 2020

Rev. Paul Offhaus, Pastor, St. John Evangelical Church, Fort Wayne, IN

October 11, 2020

Rev. Kjersten Sullivan, Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church, Battle Creek, MI

October 18, 2020

Rev. Carolyn Albert Donovan, Pastor, Peace Lutheran Church, Auston, TX

October 25, 2020

Rev. Darryl Thompson Powell, Associate Director for African Descent Ministries, ELCA and Pastor, Resurrection Lutheran, Elk Grove Village, IL

November 1, 2020

Rev. Dominic V. Guido, Senior Pastor, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY

November 8, 2020

Rev. Jeff Schlesinger, Pastor, Heart of Illinois Lutheran Parish (First Lutheran, Lee IL and Immanuel Lutheran, Compton, IL)

November 15, 2020

Rev. Louise C. Hilbert, Interim Pastor, North Carolina Synod, Durham, NC

November 22, 2020

Rev. A. Wallace Anderson, (Retired), St. Martin Lutheran Church, Malvern, OH

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Prayers of Intercession - August & September, Opening & Ending

Rev. Travis Meier, Pastor, Peace Lutheran Church, College Station, TX

Prayers of Intercession - October

Rev. Will Rose, Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Chapel Hill, NC

Call to Worship, Prayers of the Day, Prayers of Intercession - November

Rev. Daniel W. Hille, Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, OH

Thanksgiving for the Word

Rev. R Adam Berndt, Pastor, Cross of Hope Lutheran Church, Albuquerque, NM

Closing Prayer

Bishop Yehiel Curry, Metropolitan Chicago Synod, ELCA

GRAPHICS AND LAYOUT

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(With the exception of Luther's Rose used on page 92)

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NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 2, 2020



NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Sunday, August 2, 2020

Call To Worship

I will exalt you, my God the King;

I will praise your name for ever and ever.

They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty

I will praise your name for ever and ever.

The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

I will praise your name for ever and ever.

(adapted from Psalm 145)

Prayer of the Day

God of grace and abundance, you provide for us in so many ways, offering sustenance both physical and spiritual. Feed us by your Holy Spirit, and grant us assurance in your healing, forgiveness, and strength, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." ¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." ¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. ¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon - Rev. Eric Wooldridge, Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church, Enumclaw, WA

It's rare that a story appears in all four of our Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each had to pick and choose what to include in their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Nearly every event that all four writers include is directly tied to Jesus' death and resurrection. The one big exception is today's Gospel story: The Feeding of the 5,000.

Every Gospel tells us that Jesus withdrew from the great crowds. Every Gospel tells us that those very crowds found him and craved more of what he offered. Every Gospel tells us that he offered them not only teaching, but abundant food from the multiplying of five loaves of bread and two fish.

Why was this particular event so noteworthy and memorable? After all, this is the same Jesus who had said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." [Matt. 4:4] The key to this story lies, I believe, in the event that immediately preceded it. Jesus withdrew from the crowds because he had just learned of the death of his cousin and fellow preacher of God's Kingdom, John the Baptist.

"[John's] disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus," we read in Matthew 14:12.

When the disciple's whose memories would seed our New Testament watched Jesus multiply those loaves and fish, they weren't simply watching another miracle. They were answering the question, "How does our Messiah respond when tragedy hits close to home?" Jesus' response, it turns out, is to offer daily bread.

I once heard a sermon that suggested the Feeding of the 5,000 is about sharing. Jesus set the example for the crowd, this sermon explained, by sharing from one small meal. Someone else in the crowd had plenty of food, but was afraid of going hungry if he needed to share with others. He took a chance, however, and offered his food to those around him. When those around him with food stored away saw what was happening, they shared their own food, and a chain reaction resulted in full bellies and many baskets of leftovers.

While sharing with one another is important, I'd like to suggest that this type of interpretation robs the story of its depth and meaning. This is not a story about us and our ability to share from our abundance. This is a story about Jesus and his miraculous ability to offer daily bread precisely when we have nothing at all to share. Let us remind ourselves of the question the disciples would have been asking: "How does our Messiah respond when tragedy hits close to home?"

They already knew of ancient stories where God had provided in the most desperate of times. They had heard of their ancestors eating manna in the wilderness, and they might have memorized Isaiah's encouragement to the Israelites in exile: "Everyone who thirsts,

come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Now they were seeing God in the flesh live out the definition of grace: a free gift. Jesus was giving the people what they needed even when they had nothing to offer; and he was doing it in response to a terrible sin committed against his dear cousin.

I hope and pray that none of us have experienced the beheading of a family member by a tyrannical king, as Jesus did. His desire to withdraw was completely understandable; his willingness to minister amid his grief was astonishing. We do each have tyrants in our lives, however. They often go by names like illness, regret, or addiction. Like King Herod, these tyrants have the power to bring tragedy to our lives.

How does Jesus respond when tragedy hits close to home? He loves... abundantly, miraculously. He provides (for a crowd of 5,000!) enough for a day.

When the tyrants of your life oppress you, Jesus is there to provide enough for a day. He offers healing, forgiveness, and strength. He offers bread too, when that is what we need. It happens to come with his own real presence. Without money, without price, Jesus offers us enough for today. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered here and across the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

God of abundance - you have drawn us to yourself in our need. When we thirst, you have provided water; when we grow hungry, you have provided food; when we long for company, you have knit together a community of people in your image. We thank you for your abundant blessings. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of justice - you know that we stray from your call to care for our neighbors. We hoard our resources. We ignore those in need. We cling with tight fists to the gifts you have given us. Shape us into a generous people. Pour out your Spirit on us so that we may give to others as you have first given us. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of healing, pour out your presence into the bodies and spirits of those who are lonely, those who are sick, those in need of any kind (especially). Protect those who care for the sick and grant them strength for their work. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Gracious Spirit, intercede for us with sighs too deep for words; keep us in true faith; and gather us with the whole church on earth, into the communion of the triune God.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you, faithful God, for your holy Word that sustains us in hope. Your Word creates anew each day and brings forth blessing. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your Word has fed your people throughout the journey in times of joy and challenge; struggle and celebration. Continue to feed us with your Word of life, O God, **that we may abound in faith!**

Jesus embodied your Word of love and gave himself as your everlasting promise. Teach us his ways of love and service to our neighbor. Through your Word of Jesus, **equip us to share your love and life with the world!**

In thanks and praise for your living Word to heal the world, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

Lord's Prayer

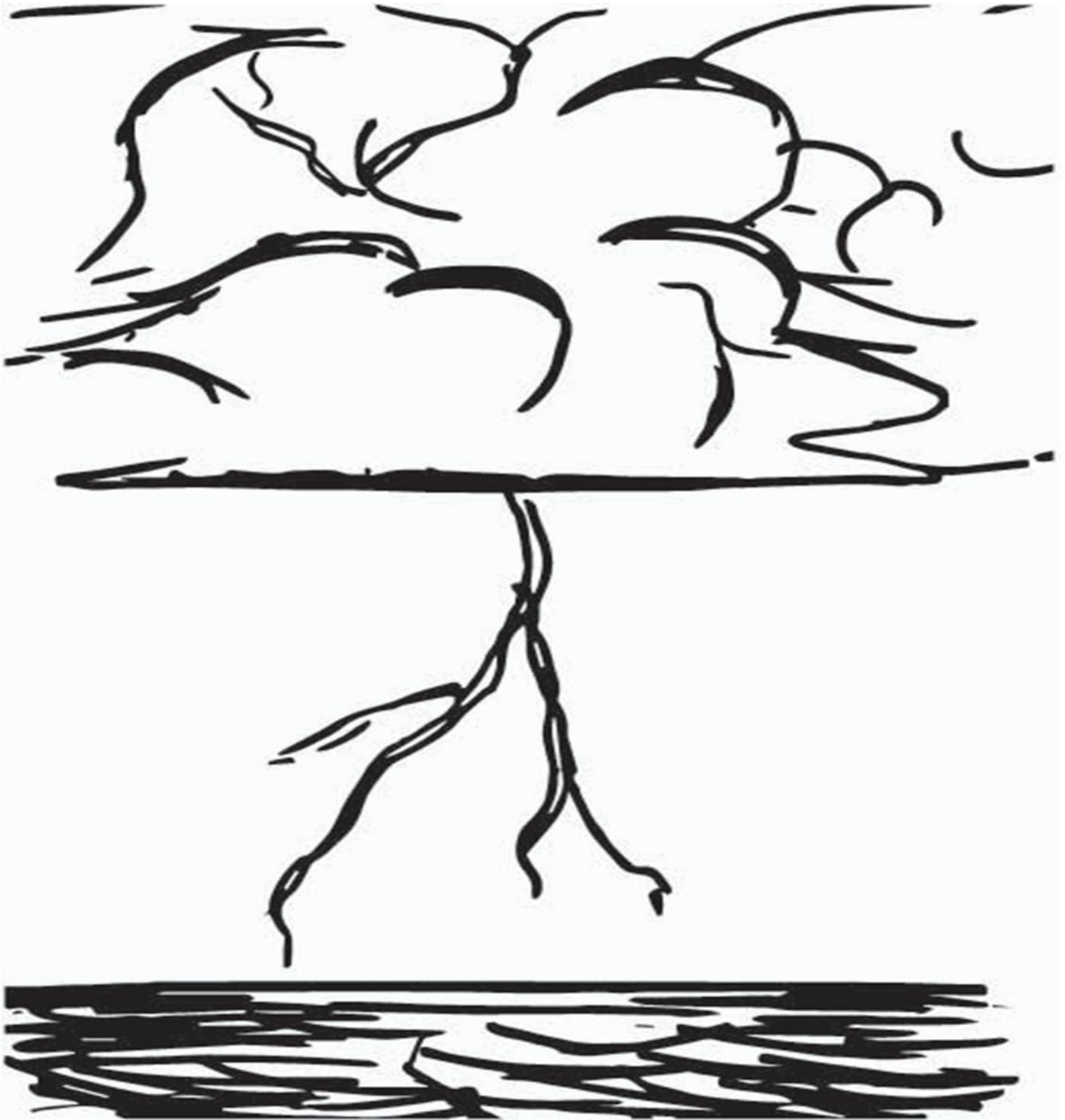
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.
Amen.

Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.
Amen.

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 9, 2020



TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 9, 2020

Call To Worship

I will listen to what God the Lord says;

he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants

Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,

he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants

The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants

(adapted from Psalm 85)

Prayer of the Day

God of all time and space, you've passed then stories of your faithfulness to us by the mouths of the faithful, and through the pages of sacred scripture. Bless us like you servant Isaiah, that we might take these holy texts into ourselves, always remembering your call, faithfulness, and saving of our lives by the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. ²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon - Rev. Jason Chesnut, Itinerant Preacher and Teacher, Delaware-Maryland Synod, Baltimore, MD

One of the first stories I learned to tell by heart was this one, Jesus walking on the water from Matthew's Gospel. I started learning it after I had recently learned something else, almost a decade ago: I was diagnosed with a mental illness, unipolar depression with bursts of intense anxiety.

Now when you learn a Bible story, you end up spending a *lot* of time with the words — not just in your head, but in your hands, your feet, sometimes your entire body. You internalize the story; you let it in, and it starts doing its thing.

This process of Biblical marination eventually led to feeling as though *Jesus himself* was catching me by the hand as I drowned in depression; his questioning look more guided by grace in my telling, his firm grasp letting me know I wasn't alone. I wasn't just telling this story; it was now becoming part of *my story*. This story wasn't just told once a long time ago, it was being retold here and now.

Turns out this ancient story wasn't ancient at all. It had something very relevant to say, to me, in my life.

—

In *Signs*, the vastly underrated 2002 film by M. Night Shyamalan set in rural Pennsylvania during an unknown alien attack, there comes this moment in the story when things look their bleakest. The aliens have landed, and, even though we can't see them, we know they're getting closer. The main character, a widower with two children, sees the writing on the wall. Sheltering in place in their home, he enlists the help of his brother and they start hammering nails into wood, strengthening the doors to the unknown outside, buckling down.

It soon goes from bad to worse. You can still hear the aliens trying to get in, the clawing and scratching melt together with the pounding of the hammer; it's a swirl of horror. It's at just this moment that the father kneels down, stops hammering, and tells his daughter a story: the story of when she was born. It's jarring to watch; with the mother dead and the rest of the family in mortal peril, this particular story seems utterly removed from the reality of what's going on around them.

One can imagine an older child hearing this same story being told and saying, "*What does this have to do with anything, Dad??!?*" And yet — The two kids in *Signs* are perhaps still young enough to encounter their birth narratives with wonder. Both the daughter and the son hear these stories told (presumably again), and you can see the peace that descends on them.

Maybe it was the moment *itself* that called forth the stories, as many of our biblical tales arise out of specific, difficult-to-forget experiences. Like, say, being almost certain you are about to die.

The stories told to the children in *Signs*, surrounded by fear and trembling, bring about healing. When it seemed as though the end was near, a father tells his children their birth narratives. Stories often function in this way, adaptable and ready to be employed at a moment's notice, beyond walls built of stone and over borders drawn by hand. Stories can make a depressed person see hope where none was before. Stories can change our very reality.

—

Matthew's Jesus is *particularly* busy today — take note of how many action verbs there are (and they all apply to him, of course) packed into barely eleven verses in the 14th chapter:

He makes the disciples get into the boat (1); he dismisses the crowds (2); he goes up a mountain (completely alone, by the way, as was his norm) to pray (3); he then approaches the disciples (walking *on the water*, no big deal) (4); he tells Peter to walk to him (5); he then catches that same Rock, Petros, so that the man of little faith doesn't lose his life entirely (6).

And he's busy doing things his disciples don't fully understand. (This could be the tagline of most of the Gospel narrative.) Spending time alone praying on a mountain, and then walking towards them early in the morning after a night of presumable confusion, as though he were a ghost — it's understandable that they wouldn't get it. Do we, fully?

Once they realize it's Jesus (the *New Revised Standard Version's* stilted "It is I" is probably better rendered "I Am," especially since the entire episode has echoes of Exodus with Jesus descending from the mountain; it makes sense that it would have echoes, too, of the unpronounceable name of God, *I Am that I Am*, but I, umm, wildly digress) Doubting Peter demands further proof. "If it really *is* you," he shouts, "command me to do the same thing!"

Jesus shrugs. "Come on out here," he motions. But Peter soon realizes he's in way over his head (as was his norm), while the rest of the disciples continue to play it safe inside the boat. Once Peter is rescued, everyone in the boat finally gets the memo: "Truly you are the Son of God," Matthew reports, although I can imagine some other things being shouted that were a bit less pious.

It's a really good story, isn't it?

I wonder if, near the end, Jesus remembered some of these earlier moments as Matthew's Gospel tells them. I wonder if he told them to himself in the garden called Gethsemane, or as he made his way to the cross on Calvary. I wonder if Mary, or Thomas, or Bartholomew, or even Peter himself happened to pull him aside later and say, "Do you remember that time when you walked on the water?"

Given the appalling violence that attended his own birth narrative (and by this I mean Matthew's very specific account of a childhood altered by barely escaping mass genocide and living as a refugee in Egypt for many formative years), I sometimes wonder if Jesus wasn't traumatized throughout his entire life. What if this story of walking on the water acted as a healing balm for himself later in his earthly journey?

Whether or not Jesus remembered it, the Jesus community, those following *The Way*, **absolutely remembered it**, because here I am, preaching about it.

It's important to recognize that the Bible isn't an historical account (with very rare exceptions); it is instead primarily a collection of *stories*. And the stories they collected were the ones they told around campfires for generations upon generations, all the way up to us. The community connected to what we call the Gospel of St. Matthew may have been the original audience, but they were by no means the last.

Generations of Jesus followers for centuries, *millennia*, have heard this story, of how Jesus walked on water, of how Peter tried to do the same but fear got the best of him...and yet, how hope survived. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth — how, indeed, can we stop from singing?

—

Birth narratives comforted the children in *Signs*, just as this narrative continues to comfort me in my mental struggles.

In the Year of our Lord, 2020, I think we could *all* use just a little more comfort. As the sounds of fear-driven politics and the scratches of white supremacy inch closer and closer to us, we as Jesus followers can be bold.

We can choose to tell stories of strength being shown through weakness in the face of a society that worships the almighty Dollar. We can tell stories of resistance in the face of police brutality. We can tell stories of hope in the face of anything but.

We can all put down our hammers and tell stories of life and love in the face of the raging flood. That's what these stories are meant for.

Prayers of Intercession

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered here and across the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Creator God, we thank and praise you for the planet earth, our home—faithfully spinning in its orbit; for sunset and sunrise, rain and sunshine, winter and summer, the seas and the sky so far away, the hills and rivers surrounding to this place. God, you are always faithful to finish the work you begin. Breathe your Spirit into us, that we may be a new creation. Teach us to be good stewards of all that you have made. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our Prayer.**

Righteous God, all nations belong to you. Bring your peace upon earth—not a “guilty” peace of compromises with evil, but a peace that allows itself to be disturbed by injustice and wrongdoing. Give justice to the weak, food to the hungry, rescue to the needy. And whether we like it or not, make us instruments and channels of your peace. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our Prayer.**

Lord, we bring “alleluias” for our joys... for birthdays, anniversaries, healings, and celebrations of those we name now... *pause* ...

We pray for those who mourn; those who are ill, those having surgery or tests, those with hurts of body, mind, or soul, (especially). Grant your healing presence in our midst. Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our Prayer.**

Gracious Spirit, intercede for us with sighs too deep for words; keep us in true faith; and gather us with the whole church on earth, into the communion of the triune God.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you, faithful God, for your holy Word that sustains us in hope. Your Word creates anew each day and brings forth blessing. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your Word has fed your people throughout the journey in times of joy and challenge; struggle and celebration. Continue to feed us with your Word of life, O God, **that we may abound in faith!**

Jesus embodied your Word of love and gave himself as your everlasting promise. Teach us his ways of love and service to our neighbor. Through your Word of Jesus, **equip us to share your love and life with the world!**

In thanks and praise for your living Word to heal the world, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

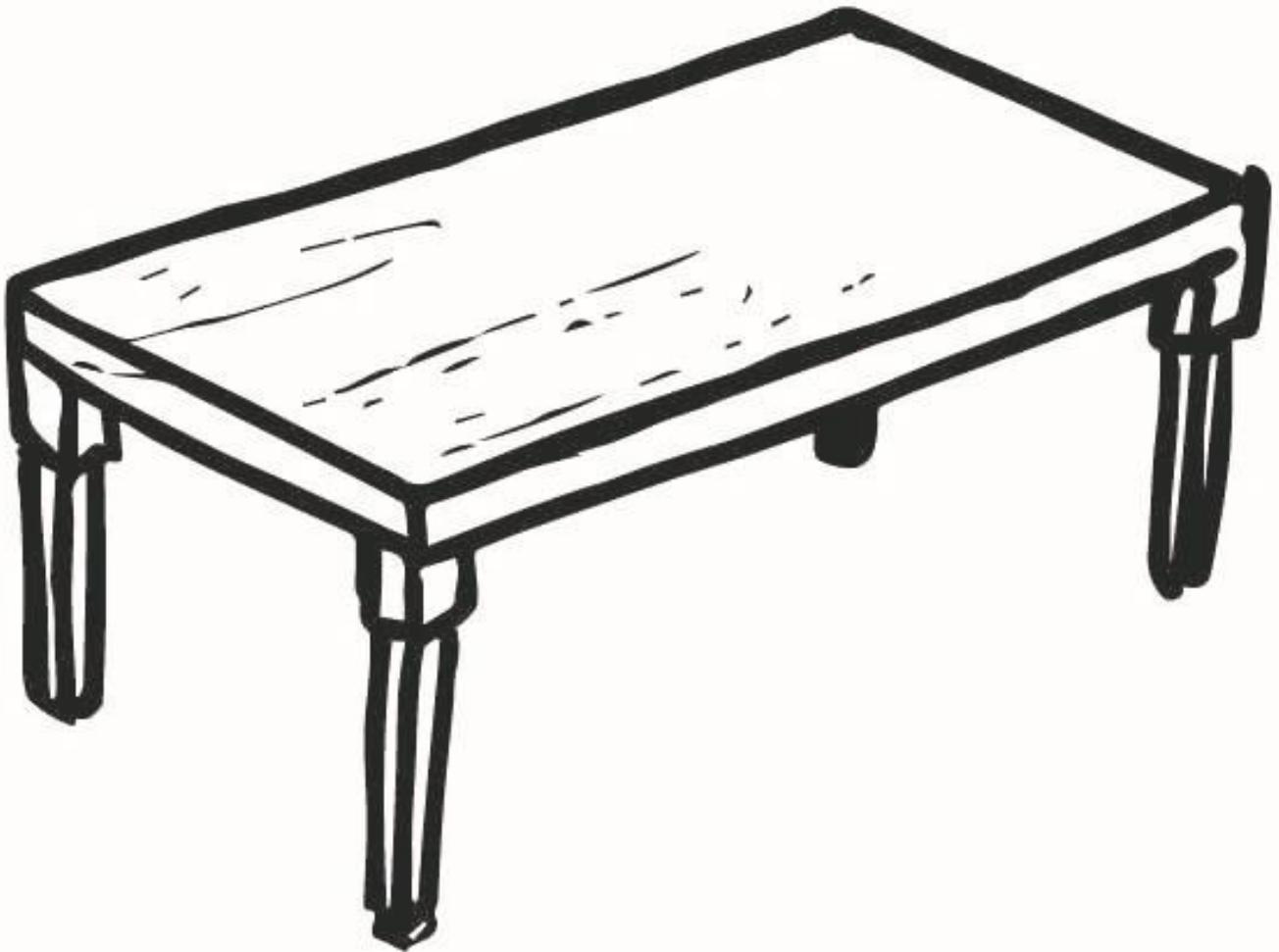
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 16, 2020



ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 16, 2020

Call To Worship

May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you O Lord.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
may all the peoples praise you O Lord.

The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.
may all the peoples praise you O Lord.

(adapted from Psalm 67)

Prayer of the Day

Gracious, merciful, and abundant Lord, the mere crumbs from your table provide us more than we could ever need. Send your Holy Spirit to shine a light in the darkness of our lives that we may be nourished through the presence and grace of your Son Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." ²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." ²⁷ "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." ²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Sermon - Rev. Bob Abrams, Assistant to the Bishop, Southern Ohio Synod

Grace and peace be with you today from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine this scene: a faithful pastor, a pastor who was extremely popular but sometimes controversial, lay sick on his deathbed. This man was known to be bold, brash, and opinionated, but preached so clearly about Jesus that people sought him out. He was the type of man who seemed so certain in his faith that he inspired others – but he was also brutally honest, and sometimes downright rude. He wasn't a very good provider of pastoral care to people; that just wasn't his style, so it was probably good that he became more of an academic pastor and teacher. But here he was, this larger-than-life character, with almost no life left in him. There were a lot of tears around that bed for those few days he was sick. His was a voice in this world that would be hard to replace. It was going to be a tough loss.

When the pastor finally died, one of his friends who was there saw that there was a piece of paper in his pocket. He pulled out that piece of paper, and on it were these words: "We are all beggars. This is true."

That pastor was Martin Luther. And that short, brutally honest note summed up his faith. We come to God with nothing. But God gives us everything.

Luther's note also helps us to understand, even if just a little bit, the position of the Canaanite woman in Matthew's story as she approached Jesus that day. Why a Canaanite woman? You see, Jesus had traveled to the north of his home territory of Galilee to an area that would today be in southern Lebanon. In that region, they were known for continuing to worship Baal. (Remember that god from the Old Testament?). We don't know why Jesus went. But we do know this: his power to heal the sick had made him so famous that even a foreign, non-Jewish woman from a different district knew who he was. So much so that she decided to approach him, a non-Jew approaching a Jewish Rabbi, to beg him to come and heal her daughter. Matthew tells us that this girl was "tormented by a demon", and that this woman was so desperate that she came to Jesus "shouting."

I wonder how many of us have felt that kind of desperation in our own lives; how many of us have been at the bedside of a sick child, or a sick spouse, or parent, or other loved one. Or how many of us have lost a job, and wondered how we might keep a roof over our heads, food on the table, and the lights on. Or, more personally, how many of us have drifted so far from God in our hearts and minds, have ventured into the kind of life, or behavior, or attitude, that makes us feel yet even more separate from him? In these kinds of moments, and so many more, we come to Jesus as desperate beggars: feeling, even knowing, that we have nothing to offer, but hoping against hope that he will help us.

This must be how that Canaanite woman felt that day. She knew that she had nothing to offer Jesus, but she knew that she had everything to lose if she didn't ask. So, ask she did; actually, she shouted. And shouted. And shouted.

What does Matthew tell us was Jesus' response? A stone, cold silence.

Isn't this her worst nightmare? Absolutely nothing word from Jesus here. He just kept walking by. Matthew says, "but he did not answer her at all." In fact, the only reason he said anything at all about this poor, desperate woman (not to her at first, but to his disciples) is because her incessant shouting annoyed the disciples, and they asked him to shut her up by sending her away. (Notice that they didn't ask him to help her, which is yet even more disturbing). He just said to them: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel". In other words, "nope. I'm not even responding. She's an outsider."

I think this is probably our worst nightmare too. How many of us have prayed, even in desperation, only to hear a stone-cold silence in response? How many of us have had times where we felt that everything was on the line, but did not get the response from God we were absolutely sure we needed at that time? How many of us have come to God empty-handed, and felt like we just plain hit a wall in prayer? How many of us have ever felt so guilty, so weighed down with sin, that we feel like we're not worthy to ask God for anything?

It's times like these where we look to Jesus for comfort; but it's stories like these where we see a Jesus who isn't comforting. How could Jesus treat someone in need this way? How could a loving Jesus just walk away from a begging, pleading woman, outsider or not?

If we sometimes feel like that Canaanite woman must have felt; if we sometimes feel that all we can do is shout for, and maybe even at God because we have nothing else left to do; if we sometimes feel that we are simply beggars at Jesus' feet, then maybe we can understand what this woman said next. When Jesus said "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs", she responded: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In other words, this woman knew that even a tiny amount of what Jesus had to offer would be enough. She was empty handed, but what Jesus could give her is everything.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was astounded at her faith. Here she was, a woman who didn't even belong to the people of God, a woman whose name we do not know, placing her trust in Jesus unconditionally, with an open heart, and with empty hands. A beggar who had nothing, talking to the Lord who could give her, and her daughter, everything. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish", Jesus said. And her daughter was set free of her torment.

Now, at first blush, it seems that this this woman just had enough faith that Jesus did what she asked. Have you ever heard that said to you? (even by a TV preacher? "If you have enough faith, God will heal you (or your loved one).") Or "if you have enough faith, you will be healthy, wealthy, and successful".

I wish I could speak to you today and tell you that Jesus will give you whatever you ask, whenever you ask it, if you just shout long and hard enough at him. Not only is that kind of

thinking dangerous to faith, it's not how God's grace and love work. This story isn't about having enough faith to create an alternate reality to our own; it's not about 'willing' Jesus to become our sort of "genie in a bottle", giving us our every desire. No, that's not what happened on that day at all. And we know that's not our own experience. We know that death is a part of life. And we know that bad things do happen to good, faithful people. Because the fact is, even though we are God's children, with seats at God's table, we don't always get what we want or ask. Sometimes not even close.

But what this story does tell us is that even the smallest crumb from God, the tiniest morsel; the smallest wind from God that blows in our lives, the stillest, smallest movements that we can barely see; even the tiniest drop from our Lord's cup, the smallest drip on our parched tongues: all of these are enough. This story tells us that in this world of uncertainty, in this life where anxiety, and loss, and fear, and death seem like they can shake the very foundations of our faith, in all of this, Jesus is enough. Jesus will always be enough for what we need.

We may not know how God will move, or even when; we may not know how God will weave together the broken strands of our lives; but we are assured of this: God knows what we need before we ask. God knows every hair on our heads. God knows each of us by name. And, the Scriptures tell us, no matter who we are, or what we've done, God loved us first. Jesus came to us, and died on the cross for us, while we were still sinners, first. And because in him and his resurrection, God has defeated sin and death, including our own, without us bringing anything at all to the relationship. We may come empty-handed, but God has already given us with everything.

So when our prayer lives seem to be dry or dead; when we feel in our bones that God cannot possibly forgive us for that same sin one more time; when we are faced with tremendous loss, and simply can't feel God's presence in it; when we don't know when the job we need will come; when we don't know when we can return to worship in our church in a "normal" way in the midst of a pandemic; in all of these things, Jesus, yes, even the tiniest crumbs of Jesus, are enough. Enough to make good out of even the worst times in our lives; enough to shine light in a dark space in our hearts and minds; enough to forgive us more times than we can imagine; enough to bring life from even death itself.

What the woman that day showed us is that it is at his feet, when we have nothing to give, when we are at our most desperate; when we are, as Luther said, nothing more than beggars; that is where, and that is when, Jesus's power is truly made visible. When the power of God, as Paul wrote, is made perfect in our weakness.

"We are all beggars. This is true." Glory be to God. Because that is when Jesus does his best work. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered here and across the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

May God be merciful to us and bless us - God you welcome all peoples in your presence. The neighbor and the stranger. The broken and the whole. The friend and the enemy. The sinner and the saint. Pour out your Spirit of welcome on us and give us the power to bless those we encounter on the journey as your people. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Let your way be known upon the earth - In the midst of so much violence in our nation and in the world, send your presence of peace and comfort. Be with those who call out in pain cry out for your mercy. Help us to be advocates for your kingdom of forgiveness, love, and peace. Empower us to be witnesses to your love for the world. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Do not be a stranger to our needs - We pray for those who mourn. Bring healing, courage, and peace for those who are ill, those hospitalized, those facing tests or surgery (especially). Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Gracious Spirit, intercede for us with sighs too deep for words; keep us in true faith; and gather us with the whole church on earth, into the communion of the triune God.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you, faithful God, for your holy Word that sustains us in hope. Your Word creates anew each day and brings forth blessing. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your Word has fed your people throughout the journey in times of joy and challenge; struggle and celebration. Continue to feed us with your Word of life, O God, **that we may abound in faith!**

Jesus embodied your Word of love and gave himself as your everlasting promise. Teach us his ways of love and service to our neighbor. Through your Word of Jesus, **equip us to share your love and life with the world!**

In thanks and praise for your living Word to heal the world, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 23, 2020



TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 23, 2020

Call To Worship

May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord,
for the glory of the Lord is great

You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.
for the glory of the Lord is great

I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for the glory of the Lord is great

(adapted from Psalm 138)

Prayer of the Day

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, you sent your Son to bring faith, hope, and love to all people the world over. Empower the church that we might be fueled by our relationship with you and share with the world Jesus' abundance of grace, love, acceptance, and hope.
Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon - Rev. Matthew Kamprath, Pastor, First Lutheran Church, Geneseo, IL

Jesus asks the disciples today, who do others say that I am? And the disciples all respond in ways that make me think they too are trying to figure out the answer for themselves. You

could almost put a question mark behind every one of their responses. Some say that you are John the Baptist? Others say that you are Elijah? Still others say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, is that the right answer? But none of these long gone prophets are who Jesus is.

So Jesus then moves to the point, by asking the disciples directly, "But who do you say that I am?" Notice that Jesus never gives in and says who he is. It is Peter, who takes the plunge and says something more definitive. There is no question mark at the end of his statement, but a period. He says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Bingo Peter, you have hit the nail on the head. Peter takes a stand confessing something impossible about Jesus' identity, and it seems like he has the right answer, for he is rewarded. He is made the rock on which the church will be built, and he is given the keys to the kingdom. I'm sure Peter was on top of the world, however, I don't think it lasted very long.

We often forget what happens directly after this scene, for the gospel reading ends today with Jesus sternly ordering the disciples to not tell anyone this secret of Jesus' Messianic identity. What follows this is Jesus beginning to show the disciples what him as Messiah means. It means that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

I don't think Peter likes this idea. Peter wants to stop this from happening to Jesus and is probably upset that Jesus is so willingly going that way and openly talking about this mission when he probably had other ideas of what a Messiah would do. Peter, and others like him, were certainly ready for an anointed king who would lead them out of their current situation, conquered and oppressed by the Roman Empire, into the glory of their former past.

Peter, I believe, hopes for this to come to pass, even if that means going to battle for the cause, and he will stop Jesus from being a Messiah who loses. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Peter says this with exclamation and he is rebuked harshly by Jesus to get behind him with exclamation. I imagine Peter going from the mountaintop of pride, to a very low place of humiliation. I think Peter was certain about **who** the Messiah was, but was off the mark with **what** the Messiah would do.

There have been many times in my life, where I have been certain about who someone is, based on appearance, attitude, or their actions, and I have been made a fool time and time again, by who people really are at heart. We often desire people that we love to be someone other than who they are, but I don't believe this to be love, but rather control and manipulation.

Peter wasn't ready to let Jesus be in control and lose his understanding of what the Messiah was to do. He takes this stubbornness all the way to Jesus' end. And at the end, Peter will be given yet another chance at confessing Jesus as Messiah after Jesus is arrested. This time however, he really messes up by denying three times even knowing him. Peter hoped for so much more than a loser and he didn't want to be one himself.

The good news is that Jesus is more than anyone could hope for. Jesus is more than what Peter could hope for. This Messiah, the Son of the living God, has saved us from our constant

need for there to be winners and losers by becoming that which we despise, a loser. The truth is, we are all in need of saving, for we are all as lost as Peter.

We would think that Peter should be stripped of the gift to be the rock upon which the church has been built. We would think that the keys to the kingdom should be taken away, from him, but thankfully Jesus hoped for so much more in Peter. Jesus didn't take away Peter's worth, but built him up to be so much more knowing all the time that he would disappoint and fail as disciple.

Jesus hopes for us to be so much more, which strangely enough, means that we be so much less. Peter in his time, understood this to be true as he continued to grow into the One he confessed to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

We in our time, are invited to be so much more than the petty differences which continue to separate and divide us. We are called to be so much more than our stubbornness and pride. We are called to be so much more than our need for power and control. We are called to hope in so much more than in things that will turn to dust, and ideologies which hold us fast. We are called and invited to be so much more open to what is. We are called to hope for healing and redemption that has come in Jesus Christ and is still to come. We are called to cling to hope in the midst of this pandemic which has stoked the fires of division, uncertainty, stubbornness, evil, and death, all of which seems to be winning, because we have placed our hope in this loser, Jesus Christ.

And when we just can't be more or will not be all who God created us to be, may we get lost in the Love of God, which is a Love that is stronger than our pride, Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered here and across the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

God of abundance - You have drawn us to yourself in our need. When we thirst, you have provided water; when we grow hungry, you have provided food; when we long for company, you have knit together a community of people in your image. We thank you for your abundant blessings. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of power and might - You poured out your Holy Spirit on Paul as he shaped communities and called people into a life of following Jesus. Empower us by your Holy Spirit, so that we may serve you faithfully, be witnesses to you life-saving good news, and invite others to follow us in a life of discipleship. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of healing and wholeness - Nurture faith in those who doubt. Lift up those who are weak in body, mind, or spirit. Heal the sick, comfort the grieving, be with those in need,

(especially). Grant peace to those who mourn and renew them in the promises of life and life eternal. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Gracious Spirit, intercede for us with sighs too deep for words; keep us in true faith; and gather us with the whole church on earth, into the communion of the triune God.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you, faithful God, for your holy Word that sustains us in hope. Your Word creates anew each day and brings forth blessing. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your Word has fed your people throughout the journey in times of joy and challenge; struggle and celebration. Continue to feed us with your Word of life, O God, **that we may abound in faith!**

Jesus embodied your Word of love and gave himself as your everlasting promise. Teach us his ways of love and service to our neighbor. Through your Word of Jesus, **equip us to share your love and life with the world!**

In thanks and praise for your living Word to heal the world, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

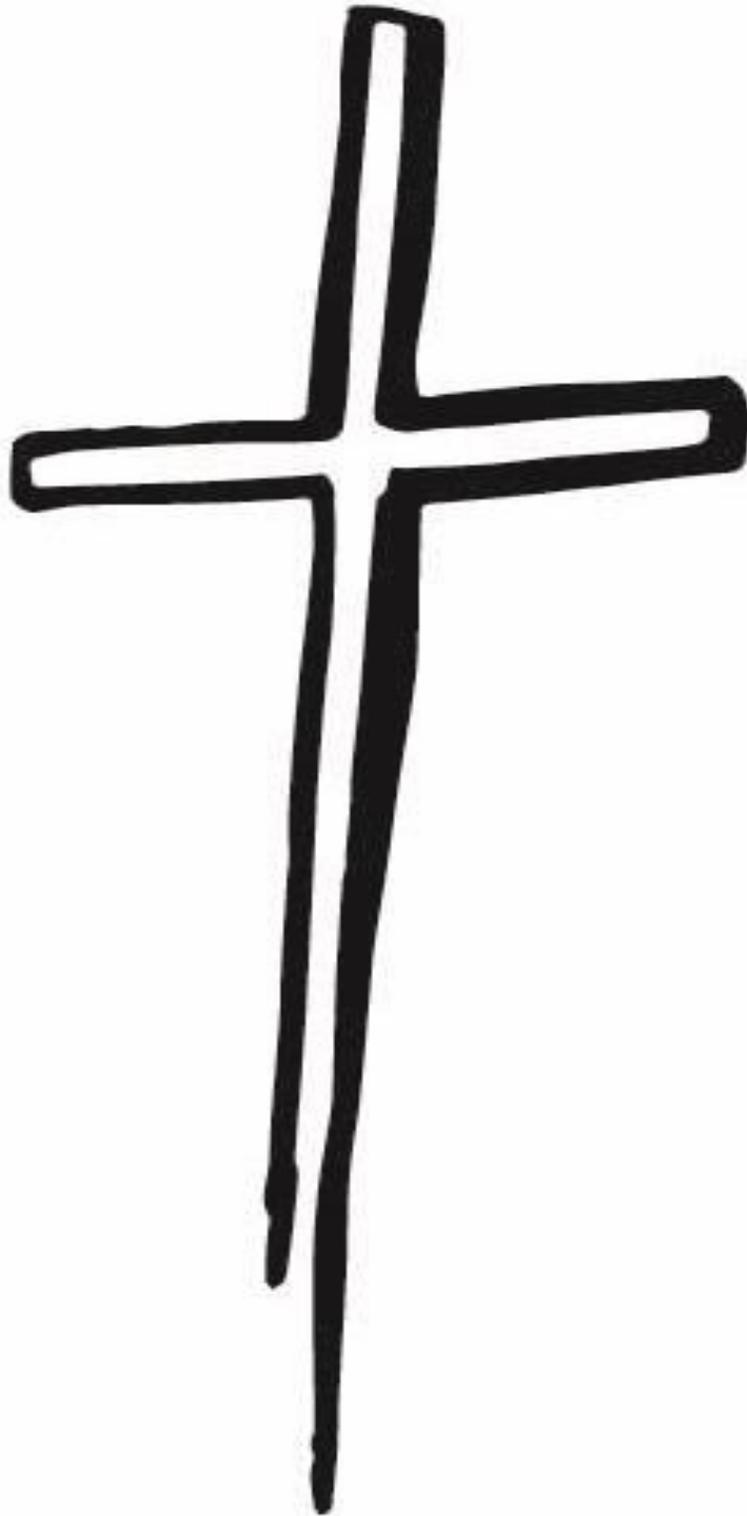
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 30, 2020



THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 30, 2020

Call To Worship

Lord, I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.

I have lived in reliance on your faithfulness
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.

Lord, I love the house where you live,
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.

(adapted from Psalm 26)

Prayer of the Day

God of faithfulness, oceans rise, and mountains fall yet you remain steadfast in your love and care for us. The words of scripture tell the story of you faithfully delivering your people time after time. Undergird our faith and strengthen our trust in you through the abundant power and promises of your son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. ²⁸ "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Sermon - Rev. Paul Jones Moody, Pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church, Cleveland, OH

It is often said that we as humans are “creatures of habit”. We tend to find patterns and rhythms of life that give us a sense of predictability and direction. We rely on seasons (civic, religious, and ecological) to anchor us through times of change, and we often find ourselves marking the passage of time with varying expressions and rituals and traditions that help us interpret our realities and make sense of life.

And of course, typically, this last leg of August is one of those transition periods that is marked by a variety of seasonal shifts: students prepare to return to classes, Church communities prepare Rally Days and “God’s Work, Our Hands” Sundays, and Starbucks gets ready for the deluge of the Pumpkin Spice Lattes that are to come.

But this year is different.

This seasonal transition is not the same as it usually is, and it is easy to feel unmoored when our usual rituals and practices can’t keep us as steady as we’d perhaps like to be.

Life has a way of shifting before us, often more rapidly than we are comfortable with. And dear Disciple Peter, a close confidant with Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, is also no stranger to the kinds of shifting circumstances that are so common in our lives. For his narrative tells of life of rapid change: moving from a full-time fishing professional to a wandering disciple, following Jesus from town to town. But this transition is fruitful, for his close proximity to Jesus allows him to witness more of Jesus’ life than most of the others in the Gospel story, and reveals for us how Jesus navigates all the ups and the downs that the Gospel story leads us through.

And today’s Gospel selection leads us right through another major narrative transition, with Peter at the fore. For, just a handful of verses ago, Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter responds, “You are Messiah, the son of God!” [****ding ding ding ding ding!****]. But in a matter of mere sentences, Peter goes from the star student to the one who needs to re-learn the lesson, as he rejects the direction where this Messiah is leading: the cross.

It’s not hard to understand that Peter would reject such a path. After all, how can the Messiah deliver Israel from Rome’s oppressive, heavy hand if he’s dead? And if his followers are executed, as well? That’s not a recipe for the kind of deliverance the people need, it seems.

Yet, the deliverance Jesus brings goes beyond what his followers expect.

Yes, Jesus seeks to deliver his people from oppression and exploitation and the Roman occupation that has not given them peace. But he also seeks to deliver his people from the systems of power and control that they think will save them.

Jesus' deliverance subverts and disarms power, and exposes its lies. It transforms relationships, and lives, and hearts, and minds, and makes a new way that even undoes the power of death itself, so that people might be healed from fear and can live abundantly and unafraid!

Yet fear is a powerful societal motivator, and when those who wield its power have it taken from them, they rarely respond generously. We witness this over and over again in our communities, in the national news, and around the world. But the ministry of Jesus contends against this. The ministry of Jesus reveals for us that God is at work in and through such cycles of death, and is part of creating a new reality where relationships are made right, across the board: religious, civic, interpersonal, intrapersonal. Which is the very cycle of death and resurrection that we experience over and over again! This is not an easy cycle, as Prophet Jeremiah testifies to, and as Apostle Paul testifies to as well.

Yet thankfully God is faithful in bringing us through to new life, even as our ways of death continue to be deconstructed. For we need such resurrection, not only in the mystery of the life that is to come, but every morning that we awake. As Luther encourages in the Catechism, perhaps we might begin each day with a simple prayer:

"I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father through Jesus Christ your dear son, that you have protected me this night from all harm and danger, and I ask you that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you completely. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen."

We have already been delivered into a new day. What will we then do? How will we respond? In what ways will we continue to embrace the good changes God brings?

May you know God's presence with you even this day. May you know God's faithfulness with you as seasons change, as empires rise and fall, as fear grips us, as we misstep and question which way we ought to go next. May you know, this day, that the saints have been guided through many a challenge in ages past, and that we too will be guided through in our world, now, today. May you know the true peace of God that endures, even now, even in this season, in this moment, in this time of the unknown.

May it be so. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered here and across the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

God of our life and our salvation - your son Jesus took up his cross for the sake of all people. Jesus has called us to follow him into a life of humble service and love. Empower us to follow in his footsteps. Pour out your Spirit upon us, so that we may serve others in life-giving love. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of plenty and peace - We thank you for all that you have given us. Empower us to be god stewards of your creation. In the midst of so much violence in our nation and in the world, send your presence of peace and comfort. Help us to bless and not to curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and to repay evil for evil. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of all life - Make us free to be whole and healthy persons, God of grace. Give respite to caregivers, infuse medical workers with skill, inspire scientists to find cures, and make us well in mind, body, and soul. We pray for those in need of healing (especially). Grant your healing presence in our lives.

Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Gracious Spirit, intercede for us with sighs too deep for words; keep us in true faith; and gather us with the whole church on earth, into the communion of the triune God.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you, faithful God, for your holy Word that sustains us in hope. Your Word creates anew each day and brings forth blessing. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

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thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
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and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

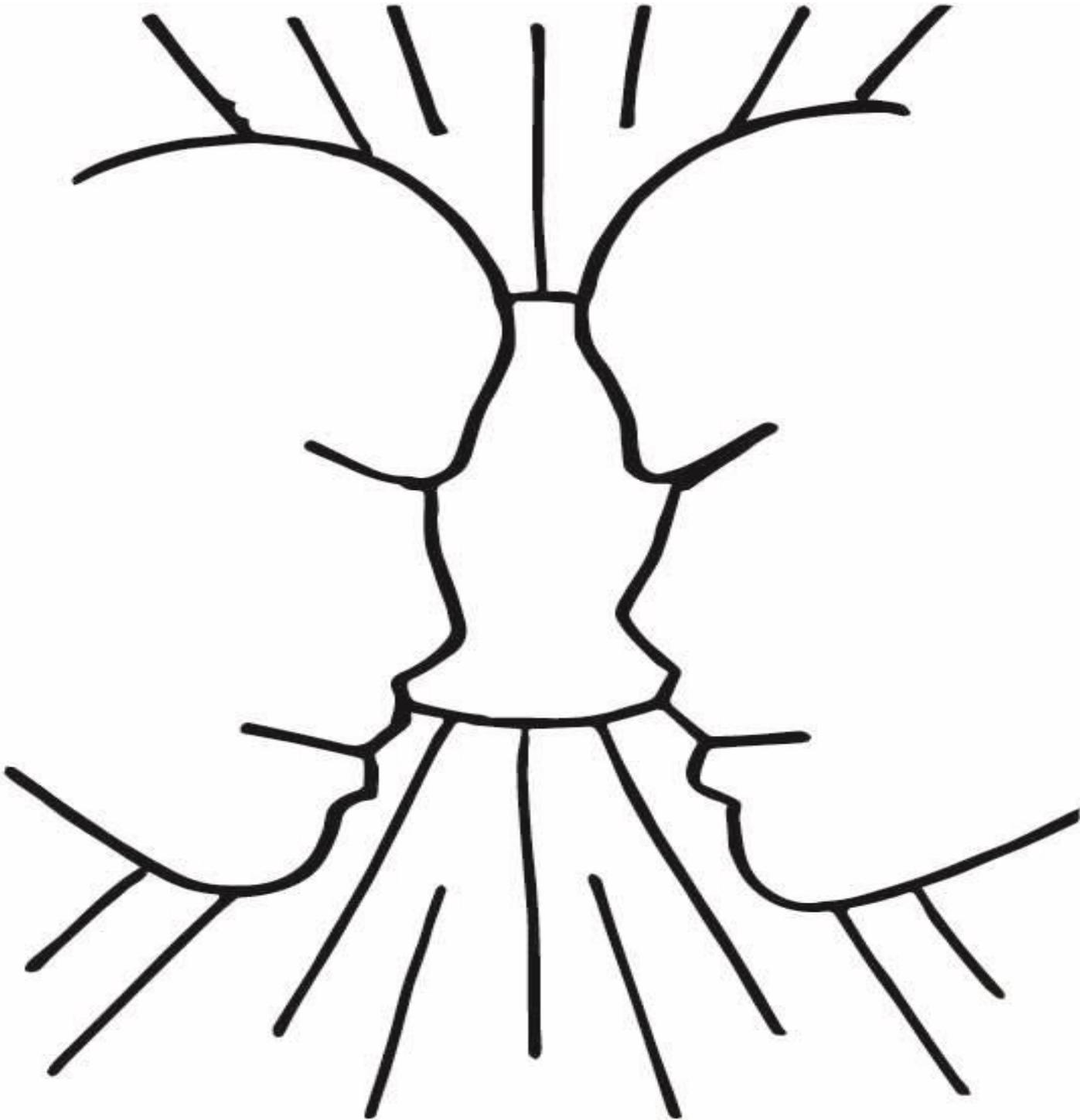
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 6, 2020



FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 6, 2020

Call To Worship

Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees

preserve my life according to your word

Direct me in the path of your commands,

preserve my life according to your word

Fulfill your promise to your servant,

preserve my life according to your word

(adapted from Psalm 119)

Prayer of the Day

Merciful God, you sent your Son in an act of love for all of creation. In these days of anxiety, aggravation, and frustration grant us the grace, power, and patience to engage the world with your peace and love that pass all understanding. This we ask of you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Gospel - Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet,"^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."^[b] ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. ¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Sermon - Rev. M. Jill King, Pastor, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Durham, NC

I am preparing this message in July for worship in early September. A beloved, familiar, yet an odd kind of task. Four months into coping with the life changing modifications brought upon us as we cope with the reality of the COVID-19 Virus.

In North Carolina, many communities of faith are either worshipping via Zoom, Facebook, or another format. A few are having drive-in worship services where people come to church and sit in their respective cars. During this time, the people of Our Savior, Durham enjoy to connecting with one another via Zoom. On-line worship begins at 11:00, following a time of social interaction and connection at 10:30. We truly miss gathering together for worship, in a format that provides opportunities for us to greet one another in Christian fellowship and love, pass the peace, sing hymns of faith together, and gather around God's table of mercy, grace and love. For such a time as this, we long for and pray.

In addition to serving as the part-time pastor at Our Savior Lutheran Church, for the past year I have been working as a cashier at a friend's convenience store. The store is located near both my home and church. Many of the customers have known me for years. Others since I started (officially) working at the store. Some are regular customers who come by the store every day. Others stop by the store because they have a medical appointment at Duke University Medical Center. Some happen to be in the area. Unfortunately, a few come solely to rob and/or steal.

The stresses of living under local orders for face masks and social distancing, at a time when many are presently laid-off or unemployed, are noticeable in all. Patience, tolerance, and understanding are short-lived. Tempers flare. Common courtesies have seemingly gone by the wayside. Instead of reaching out to and caring for others, many have adapted by becoming even more self-centered.

To the Roman church, in advance of his arrival, Paul writes:

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Love one another. Loving others is sometimes difficult task. Especially when we consider the needs those who defy and blatantly ignore local orders with regards to wearing masks in public places and keeping social distance, those who think that the world revolves around them, those who are noticeably self-centered, angry, arrogant and rude. And even more difficult, especially for me, are those who intentionally come to the store to rob and to steal.

I wonder. Are there people in your family, neighborhood, places of employment or members of your congregation, who are difficult for you love or to reach out to, in Christian fellowship. Perhaps there are others you encounter while you are driving or running errands with whom it is difficult to do no wrong. Are there people who may not be welcomed as members of your congregation who need to experience the love of a neighbor or encounter you clothed in the armor of light. Or to experience for themselves the love of God that we have in Christ

Jesus via a smile, a bottle of cold water, food for the table, a tank full of gas, words of encouragement and hope, an offer of prayer or an expression of gratitude for essential personnel.

May the love of God that we have in Christ Jesus, be with you, be gracious towards you, strengthen you in Christian fellowship and love, and give you peace.
Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

God of grace, we pray for the church universal. Reconcile our differences. Forgive our divisions. Unite us at your table. Continue to empower us by your Spirit, to be the body of Christ in the world. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of the kingdom, you sent your son into the world not to condemn, but to show us who you are. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection you showed us the depth of your love. In our darkness Jesus provides light. Strengthen our faithfulness in you and in each other. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of blessings, we give you thanks for all you have blessed us with. Bring joy in the lives of those celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and significant moments. Help those who struggle with depression and anxiety. Uplift those who find each day a struggle. Bring healing to the sick, (especially). Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you merciful God, for your holy Word that forgives and gives life. In your Word, peace and reconciliation is created and offered for all. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your living Word abounds in steadfast love showing grace and mercy to all generations. Continue to sustain us by your Word of life, O God, **that we may know your forgiveness!**

Jesus is your humble word, caring for the neighbor to share the life of God. Through your Word of Jesus, O God, **inspire us to humbly care for the needs of the world!**

In thanks and praise for your Word of mercy and grace, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

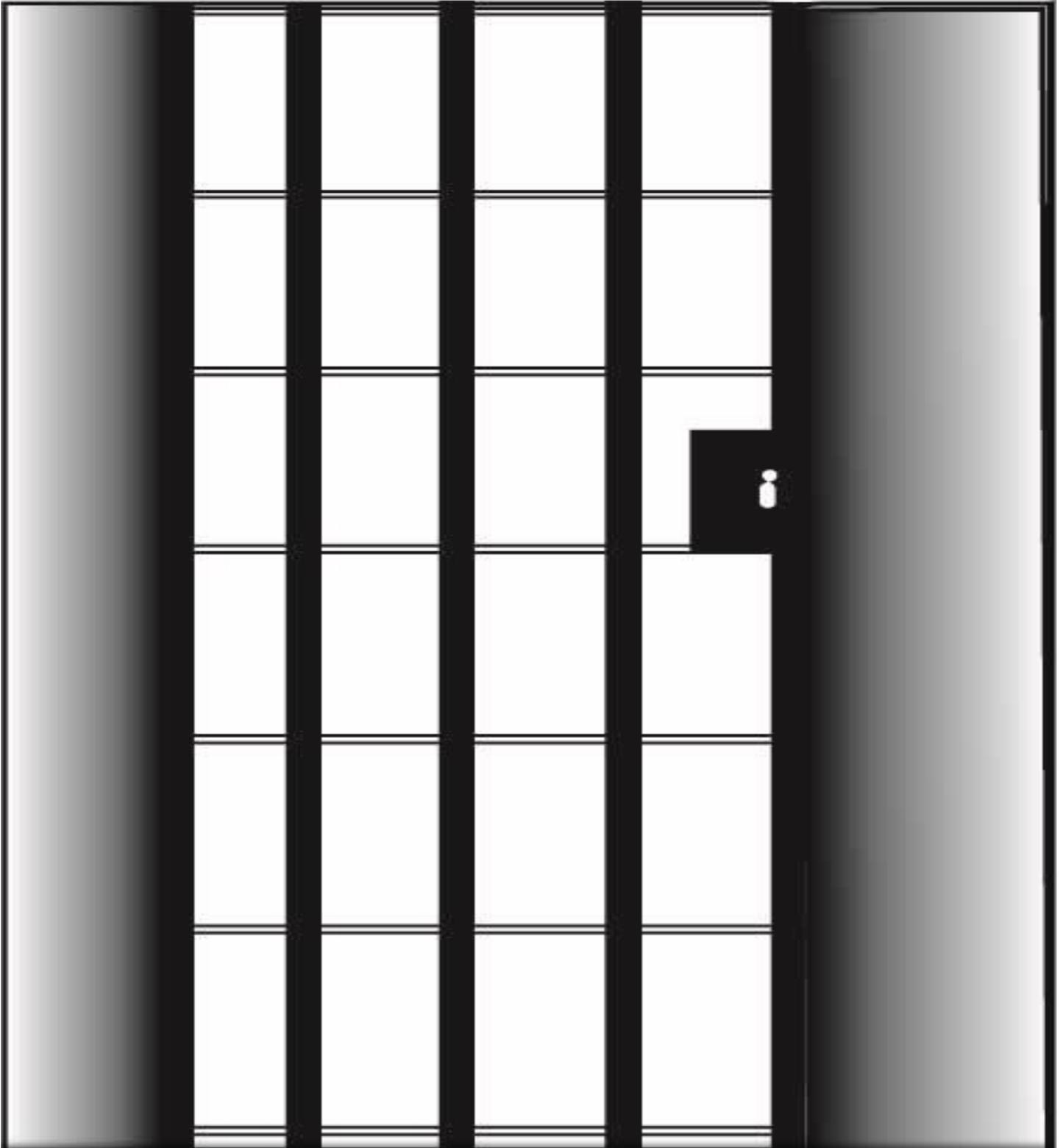
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 13, 2020



FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 13, 2020

Call To Worship

The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed
Praise the Lord, O my soul.

The Lord forgives all your sins,
Praise the Lord, O my soul.

The Lord satisfies your desires with good things,
Praise the Lord, O my soul.

(adapted from Psalm 103)

Prayer of the Day

God of justice and peace, we thank you for the men and women throughout history who have served as testaments to your care and love for all people. Give us the strength to continue on this path, following along the way of you Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Reading - Romans 14:1-12

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ²One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

¹²So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Sermon - Rev. Justin Thornburgh, Pastor, Emerson Avenue Baptist Church, Indianapolis, IN

WE ARE THE LORD'S

Beloved Friends,

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

As I sit in a local park here in Indianapolis writing these words to you, it is nearing the end of July and less than a week after the passing of Representative John Lewis of Georgia.

For those who don't know or aren't aware, Rep. Lewis began his public life of activism after reading and becoming inspired by a comic book based on the life (up until then) of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Mr. Lewis entered public life and became a leader of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. His passion led him to be one of the voices that stepped up to the podium on that August day when Dr. King described his Dream.

Rep. Lewis while leading SNCC, and for a number of years after, would be arrested and beaten in his commitment to the non-violent resistance of oppressive powers. Until his death his commitment was always to those whose lives are lived with their backs against the wall. And the reason I bring all of this up is because what undergirded all of his work, what lit his fire of justice, and what gave him the strength to continue was his unshakable knowledge that we are the Lord's. His commitment to nonviolent resistance was cemented in the fact that we are the Lord's.

His story is what came to mind as I was preparing to write these words to you, and as I reflected on Paul's words to the Romans.

As we read this passage, which comes amid ethical exhortations by the apostle, we are confronted with how we are to respond to others who are part of the body of Christ. We are given a roll call of potential faults followed by possible responses. The apostle is letting us know that this is how we are to respond to our beloved siblings who may have a different way of understanding this thing we call life.

Now, lest this American Baptist pastor cause my friend Pastor Hille's head to explode, I am not proclaiming works righteousness here, quite the contrary, what Paul is doing and what I am echoing here is a way to respond to differences and criticisms having already been, in good old-fashioned Baptist talk, saved. Having accepted the reality of grace, our lives are shaped and changed into something new and thus, our responses to the actions of others

are shaped and changed by the cross shaped love of God. So, these actions are a response to grace not a way to earn grace.

But what happens, then, when we start to see things happening that we know are not right, and yet feel compelled to follow Paul's exhortations? This is the situation I often find myself in, as I come from a prophetic tradition and often find myself at odds with those in power. How do we respond to those who seek death and destruction, and still maintain the higher ground without losing our footing, our grounding, and our rootedness?

This is where Rep. Lewis comes in. As I said above his activism was rooted in the foundational truth espoused by the Apostle, that we are the Lord's. When we—in my tradition, commit to follow Christ and in yours affirm your baptismal vows, we acknowledge what we are dying to (ourselves) and living a new life, a new life that is in the Lord, in the one who created each and every one of us out of stardust and dirt and in their Divine Image. When we commit our lives to walking in the way of Christ, saved by grace, we are committing to a way that acknowledges that yes, we are the Lord's, but in a larger sense that WE ALL are the Lord's.

This is the truth that Rep. Lewis understood and that fueled his fight for civil rights. This is the truth that should ground us when we see the forces of death and destruction shadowing our land. We have the voice to command the powers to fall down, we have the responsibility—the ethical response to this gift called grace - to name these powers and to call them to account; and yet, to do so knowing that no one is beyond the transforming power of God's love.

When we call upon administrations to act justly, to have their hearts broken, we do so, not from a place of judgement but from a place of hope. When we call upon our leaders to act with decency and compassion and mercy we do so knowing that through those acts they might encounter the liberating love of God who will meet them and transform them.

This is how Rep. Lewis, beaten and bloodied, found the courage to face Bull Connor a second time atop the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, AL. This is how, Dr. King had the boldness from a Birmingham Jail to call the white moderate Christians to account. They understood that we are the Lord's and when followers of the Way live into their transformed reality, the reality that they are they Lord's, the reality that they are covered by the love of our Lord they can change the world. And they can do it in a way that makes no sense to a world that lives in a constant state of competition and one-up-manship. They can do it in love.

And so, my beloved friends, I want to leave you with this. Rest in the blessed assurance that you are the Lord's. You have been given a gift like none other, do not be afraid to use it, to remind others that they too are the Lord's either by lifting them up when they need carried or calling them to account when they deny the way of love. Proclaim life. Proclaim love. Proclaim grace. For these gifts are ours to share.

God's peace be with you all.

Prayers of Intercession

Open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

God of forgiveness, you are full of compassion and mercy. You are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us. Empower us to act out mercy, kindness, and love. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

We give thanks for your love that is unfailing and your mercies that never end. We thank you for all that we celebrate in our lives; for your everlasting promises made in Holy Baptism. Strengthen and sustain us so that we may continue to bear your light to the world. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

We pray for those who mourn, grant them peace and comfort. Bring healing, courage, and peace for those who are ill, those hospitalized, those facing tests or surgery (especially). Grant your healing presence in our lives. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you merciful God, for your holy Word that forgives and gives life. In your Word, peace and reconciliation is created and offered for all. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your living Word abounds in steadfast love showing grace and mercy to all generations. Continue to sustain us by your Word of life, O God, **that we may know your forgiveness!**

Jesus is your humble word, caring for the neighbor to share the life of God. Through your Word of Jesus, O God, **inspire us to humbly care for the needs of the world!**

In thanks and praise for your Word of mercy and grace, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

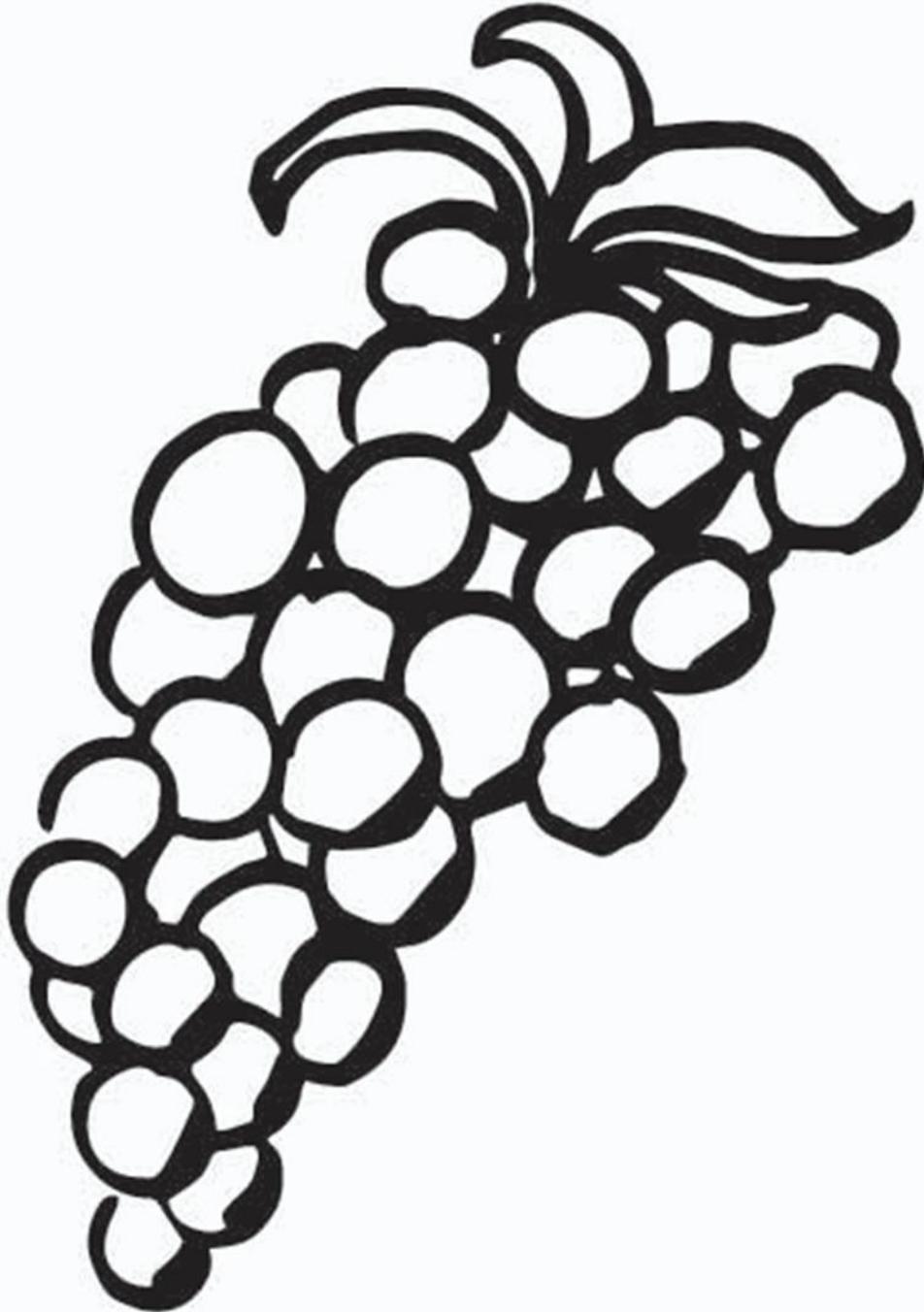
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 20, 2020



SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 20, 2020

Call To Worship

The LORD is good to all,

I will meditate on God's wonderful works

One generation commends the Lord's works to another

I will meditate on God's wonderful works

Every day I will praise you

I will meditate on God's wonderful works

(adapted from Psalm 145)

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, your grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love are beyond measure. Strengthen us to trust not in what we have, but in the abundance of what you are blessing us with through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷"'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹"The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³"But he answered one of them, 'I am not

being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Sermon - Rev. Daniel W. Hille, Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, OH

I once saw a cartoon in a newspaper. It was two simple frames. In the left-hand frame there were three children trying to watch a baseball game over a fence. The children were of different heights, one short, one average, and one very tall. All three were standing on boxes that were the exact same height. The result was that the tallest child could clearly see the game, the child of average height could see over the fence with the help of the box, and the shortest child had no hope whatsoever of seeing the game. On the top of the frame was the word- equal.

In the right-hand frame, there were the same three children, the same ball game, and the same fence impeding their views. In this frame the shortest child had two boxes stacked up and finally able to see, the middle child remained standing on one box, and the tallest stood on the ground but was still able to see the game fine. On the top of the frame was the word- fair.

Equality and fairness are not synonyms.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

A denarius was a daily wage. So for answering the call, the landowner gave each of the workers a day's wages.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who calls any who will listen, and provides what they need to make it through to another day.

So what do they need? How much do they need?

My friend and mentor Ronnie once gave a children's sermon during which he asked the kids an interesting question. "If Jesus were at Taco Bell and he was going to get you a drink, what size fountain drink do you think he would get you?" The children laughed at the idea of Jesus bringing them a soda at Taco Bell, then they begin to guess- Small? Medium? Extra Large?" Ronnie smiled, the congregation chuckled, then he said, "If Jesus were in Taco Bell, he would order *just enough*... because just enough for Jesus is always more than enough us."

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who calls workers to the field, and promises them just enough to be cared for, so they can come back and be provided for the next day.

The kingdom, as we hear it described so often, is that of God who loves us so much that the Son, Jesus Christ, was sent so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. How much does God love us? Just enough... which is far more than enough. God's "just

enough" is the abundance we receive. God's "just enough" is more grace, love, and salvation than we can even begin to comprehend.

Is this idea fair? That God loves us all the same amount? I'd be willing to make the argument that my Grandmother doesn't need half as much grace as I do, and I'd like to think (jokingly) that my brother needs more grace than I do.

But God loves us all equally, and that is to say God loves us abundantly, graciously, and unceasingly.

This notion of equality is hard for some to swallow. Shouldn't those who worked longer get paid more? That is what the voices who worked all day were asking. Isn't my time worth more? That is the question that legacy, establishment, and generational entitlement asks. Then again, equality and fairness are not synonyms

God loves us equally. Whether that's fair or not, I thank God that it is true. I am thankful that God loves us exactly as we are, saints & sinners, cradle Christians & those who came to the faith later in life. God loves us equally as children of faith.

So how much does God love us?

Just enough.

Just enough to wash us in the waters of Baptism.

Just enough to feed us with the meal of the Eucharist.

Just enough to send Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, to die on the cross for us.

God loves us just enough to care for us and provide us an abundance of love, forgiveness, and salvation so that we might come back, and answer the call again tomorrow. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

God of generosity, your grace and mercy has been given to the whole world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Empower us to be witnesses of your life-giving Gospel. Send us as laborers into the fields of this world to do your work of mercy and justice. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of all creation, your creative power causes the changes of season. We thank you for the summer, the time of growing. We pray that you bless us with an abundant harvest to sustain us through the coming months. Sustain us with your gifts. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

God of healing, grant your healing presence, courage, and peace for those who are ill, those hospitalized, those facing tests or surgery (especially). Grant your presence to those who mourn. Lord, in your mercy.

Hear our Prayer.

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you merciful God, for your holy Word that forgives and gives life. In your Word, peace and reconciliation is created and offered for all. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your living Word abounds in steadfast love showing grace and mercy to all generations. Continue to sustain us by your Word of life, O God, **that we may know your forgiveness!**

Jesus is your humble word, caring for the neighbor to share the life of God. Through your Word of Jesus, O God, **inspire us to humbly care for the needs of the world!**

In thanks and praise for your Word of mercy and grace, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
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Give us this day our daily bread;
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who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

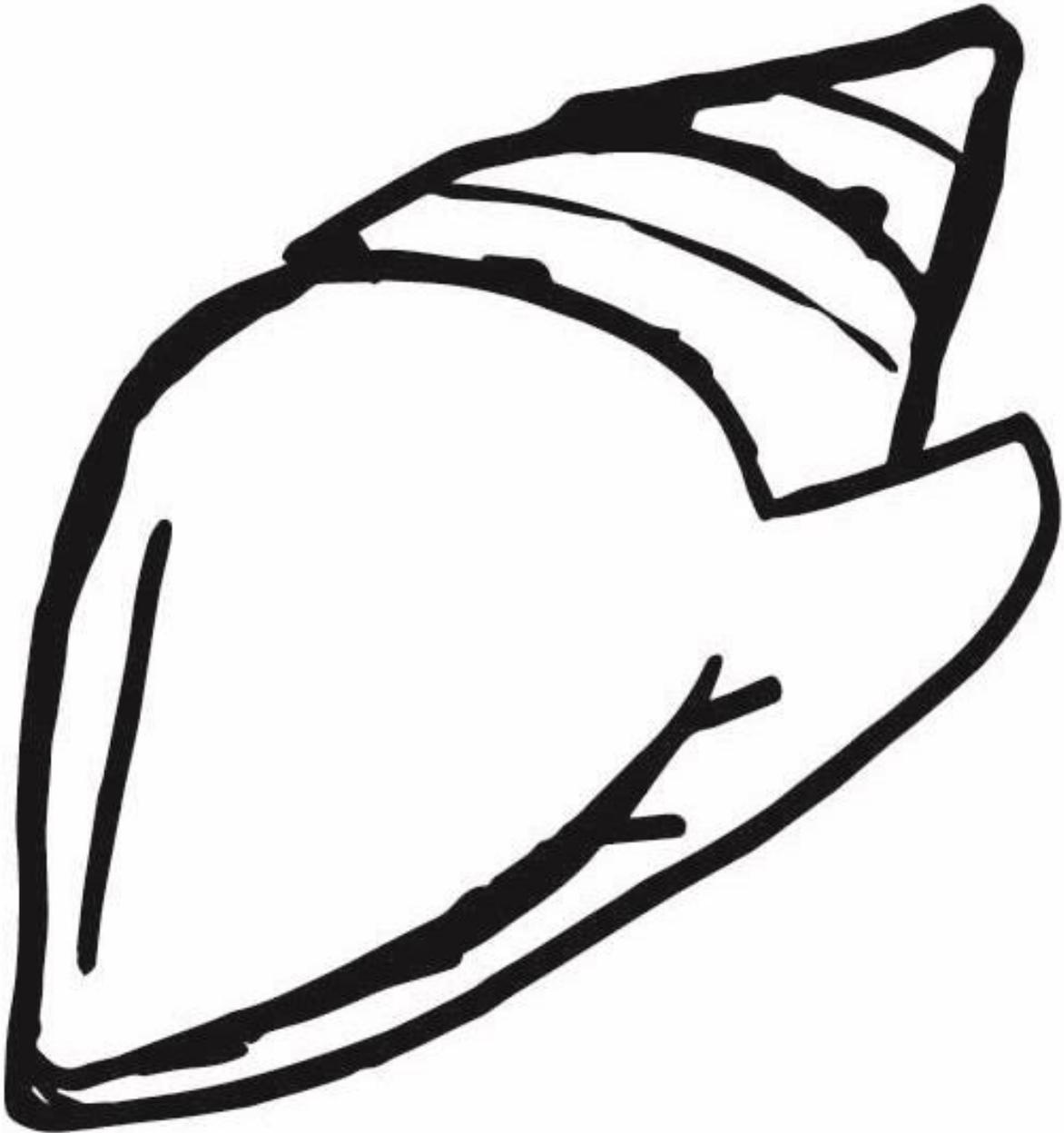
Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 27, 2020



SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 27, 2020

Call To Worship

Do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me
In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

Show me your ways, LORD,
teach me your paths
In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

Relieve the troubles of my heart
and free me from my anguish
In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

(adapted from Psalm 25)

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, maker, and redeemer of all.
You love us as your daughters and sons, calling us to follow you in both word and deed.
and loving us when we get both wrong. Remind us of your faithfulness and empower us with
your Spirit as we seek to be outposts of your kingdom here on Earth.
Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 21:23-32

²³ Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'" ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸ "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' ²⁹ "'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. ³¹ "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God

ahead of you. ³²For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Sermon - Rev. Jocelyn Johnston, Interim Pastor, St. John Lutheran Church, North Versailles, PA

Rachel Held Evans was a theologian and best-selling author who was tragically taken from this world too soon, last year at the age of 37. I have been grateful for her teaching in my life and was particularly moved by a story she tells in one of her books. Rachel had lived most of her life as a good Christian, or so she thought, until she had a crisis of faith as a young adult. On her journey, as she discovered what it means to really follow Jesus, she had a spiritual awakening on a trip to India. Because I also took a trip to India many years ago, I think I especially connected with this story. This is what she says about that trip...

"James, the brother of Jesus, once said that true religion is caring for orphans and widows, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when my first religious experience in India happened in the company of widows and orphans. About thirty of us were packed into a fifteen-passenger van, windows down, speeding down the streets of Hyderabad on our way to a church in the city. The kids, ranging in age from five to fifteen, were dressed in their Sunday best and were piled on top of one another, singing as loudly as possible and with no inhibition songs about Jesus in English and Telugu. My eardrums rang. My stomach lurched with every sudden swerve of the van. My lungs ached from inhaling pollution, and my head pounded from the heat. But I hadn't felt that close to Jesus in years. I felt certain that he was crammed in there with us, singing along.

In India, I was introduced to the kingdom of heaven – not as it exists in some future state but as it exists in the here and now, where the hungry are fed with both physical and spiritual bread, where the sick are saved from both their diseases and their sins, where an illiterate widow taught me more about faith than any theologian ever could, and where children from the slums sing with God. In India, I learned that the gospel is still special. Jesus still matters and can make a difference in people's lives."

We bring the kingdom of God to this world when we follow Jesus in not only our words, but in our actions as well. You know that phrase "do as I say, not as I do"? It's often used when kids catch their parents doing the very things they've been told not to do. This phrase implies that our words mean more than our actions. But I think today's message from Scripture challenges that theory.

Jesus' parable spoken to that specific audience implies a way to compare the two "sons" with those around him: the tax-collectors and prostitutes, on the one hand, and the chief priests and elders, on the other hand. Those most expected to understand and do God's will -- the religious leadership -- fail to appreciate God's working in and through John the Baptist and Jesus, while those least expected to understand and do God's will -- the ones most culturally despised by the rest -- acknowledge God's work in John's baptism and message and follow Christ.

Jesus considered both groups of people God's children. But in the parable, the sons' actions, not their words, determined which was obedient or true, that is, the one most willing to

participate in the father's business. In the allegory, Jesus equated involvement in the father's vineyard with recognition of John's baptism as a sign of God's authority. And to do God's will was to be and act in close association with Jesus.

The parable sets up a comparison of two sons. One who says he will do what his father asks, but doesn't, with one who says he won't, but does. There is an accusation in the parable, particularly for the audience to which Jesus is speaking -- some who claim to obey the Father and observe the requirements of the Law fail to actually do so. Is this who we are, as believers -- as pastors, teachers, leaders, and members of the Church? Do we pretend to be obedient, or do we actually *act* obediently? Our thoughts and words are important. How we express and confess our faith is important. But God's Word today tells us that faith doesn't just mean thinking a certain way. Faith in Christ implies action. It means speaking *and* acting boldly by the authority of Christ.

In telling about her trip to India, Rachel Held Evans illustrates the message we receive today from the Word of God. She says, "This radical Jesus wanted to live not only in my heart and in my head but also in my hands, as I fed the hungry, reached out to my enemies, healed the sick, and comforted the lonely. Being a Christian, it seemed, isn't about agreeing to a certain way; it is about embodying a certain way. It is about living as an incarnation of Jesus, as Jesus lived as an incarnation of God."

Here's the real trick: ultimately neither son in the parable is perfect. One says the right thing but does not do the right thing. The other does not say the right thing but does the right thing. They both get it wrong. Similarly, we are far from perfect. Sometimes we say the right things, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we do the right things, other times we don't. We all get it wrong from time to time, maybe even more often than not. We are all in need of God's love and grace to save us from ourselves. This Scripture passage, more than anything else I think, is about recognizing Jesus' authority, and with that, God's authority, above all else.

The letter from Paul to the Philippians calls us to remember that we are a community in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and called to hold the interests of others and the will of God higher than our own interests. This may seem like a difficult task. But this Scripture text also reminds us that God is at work in us. The Spirit of God enables us to gather food for the hungry, comfort the sick or grieving, advocate for the vulnerable, show kindness to our enemies, forgive those who hurt us, and love and be loved. God empowers us to be the living incarnation of Jesus Christ in this world and to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

Gracious God, we give thanks to you, because you are good. Your mercy and love endure forever. Empower us to be beacons of your love, extensions of your mercy, and stewards of your justice in our world. Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

God of all peoples, You rejoice in the people and places of the world. We pray for nations who cannot sit at table together, for leaders distracted by anxiety and fear, and for refugees unwelcome in their homelands. We pray for those who lead our nation, state, and community. Grant them patience, understanding, and wisdom. Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

We pray for the lonely, the disheartened, those who suffer from debilitating illness, those who cannot speak for themselves, and those in any need, (especially). Grant your healing presence in our lives.. Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.

Thanksgiving for the Word

We bless you merciful God, for your holy Word that forgives and gives life. In your Word, peace and reconciliation is created and offered for all. For your Word of grace, O God, **we give you thanks and praise!**

Your living Word abounds in steadfast love showing grace and mercy to all generations. Continue to sustain us by your Word of life, O God, **that we may know your forgiveness!**

Jesus is your humble word, caring for the neighbor to share the life of God. Through your Word of Jesus, O God, **inspire us to humbly care for the needs of the world!**

In thanks and praise for your Word of mercy and grace, Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,

and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever.

Amen.

Closing Prayer

As we move from this time of worship, we rejoice O Lord that your peace abides with us. May it give us the patience and resilience to faithfully serve you with acts of love for our brothers and sisters even from our homes.

Amen.