

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRTIETH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: The Lord is good!
All: God's steadfast love endures forever.
One: Remember again the wonderful works of God.
All: God has blessed us beyond all deserving.
One: Rejoice in the abundance of God's steadfast love.
All: We come to worship the one true God.

***OPENING HYMN "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" GtG 39**

One: Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
All: there is no shadow of turning with thee.
One: Thou changest not;
All: thy compassions they fail not.
One: As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.
Great is thy faithfulness!
All: Great is thy faithfulness!
One: Morning by morning, new mercies I see.
All: All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

One: Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
All: join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

One: Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:
All: blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

One: Great is thy faithfulness!
All: Great is thy faithfulness!
One: Morning by morning, new mercies I see.
All: All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Lord, in spite of your faithfulness, we have chosen other gods. We have exchanged your glory for the gilded idols of success and money and status: an image of worldly favor, which is nothing. Be merciful to your people today and every day, when we stray and when we return, at our best and at our worst. We have abandoned the pathway you desire for us. We confess our sin and plead for your forgiveness. We turn around and turn back to you for mercy, pardon, and peace. Forgive us. Reclaim us. And renew us as your people for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from Psalm 103)*

One: The love of God is from forever to always, sure and never-failing.
All: “The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love.”
One: “God does not keep on rebuking and is not angry forever.”
All: “The Lord does not punish us as we deserve or repay us for our sins and wrongs.”
One: “As high as the sky is above the earth, so great is God’s love for those who have reverence for God.”
All: “As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our sins from us.”
One: So rejoice and sing of God’s love and glory!
All: For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Alleluia! Amen!

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: And also with you.

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6,19-23

EXODUS 32:1-14 (various)

¹ When the people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold earrings which your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off their gold earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" ⁶ They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

⁷ The LORD spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! because your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

¹¹ But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God and said, "LORD, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that the Lord brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, to possess for all time.'" ¹⁴ So the LORD relented and did not bring on the people the disaster the Lord had threatened.

PSALM 106:1-6,19-23 (various)

¹ Praise the LORD!

O give thanks to the LORD, for the Lord is good;
for God's steadfast love endures forever.

² Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD
or fully declare God's praise?

³ Blessed are those who act justly,
who always do what is right.

⁴ Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people;
visit me with your saving help

⁵ that I may see the good of your chosen ones,

*that I may rejoice in the joy of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.*

⁶ *We have sinned—right along with our ancestors.
We have done what is wrong.
We have acted wickedly.*

¹⁹ *They made a calf at Horeb
and worshiped a cast image.*

²⁰ *They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass.*

²¹ *They forgot the God who saved them,
who had done great things in Egypt,*

²² *wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.*

²³ *So God said God would destroy them—
except that Moses, God’s chosen one,
stood in the way,
to turn away God’s wrath from destroying them.*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “We Would Do Well to...” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Everyone gets it wrong...except one. And it’s not who you’d think.

The people are (fairly) fresh from being delivered from Egypt, having experienced the crossing of the Red Sea, having seen and heard and experienced “*the mighty acts of the Lord*” (Psalm 106:2).

And then this.

They are anxious, impatient. They don’t know where Moses has gone. Do they feel the same way about God?

As Psalm 106 makes clear, “*They forgot the God who saved them*” (v.21).

They forgot the real story of what had happened and substituted another, identifying Moses as the one “*who brought us up out of the land of Egypt*” (v.1), and later identifying a grass-eating ox (Psalm 106:20) -- or, worse yet, a simple statue of a grass-eating ox -- as the one “*who brought you up out of the land of Egypt*” (Exodus 32:4).

They forgot.

But anxiety and impatience will do that: blur the memory, or even erase it altogether.

How easily we too forget: when life goes wrong, when things become difficult, when not everything goes our way.

“*We have sinned--right along with our ancestors,*” the psalmist reminds us. We, like our ancestors, have “*forgotten the God who saved us.*”

We have forgotten who we are and whose we are, so we can't keep the players straight, and we can't keep our places straight.

For we are not Democrat or Republican.

We are not on the Right or on the Left.

We are children of God: created, loved, cared for by the God whose "*steadfast love endures forever*" (Psalm 106:1).

And perhaps it's because we have forgotten who we are and whose we are...

...maybe it's because we have forgotten the mighty acts of God...

...that we are in such a mess: at each others' throats, listening to no one, at odds with one another because we are at odds with who we are and whose we are.

We have forgotten what God has done for us.

We have forgotten how God has demonstrated justice and compassion, might and tenderness.

We have forgotten the mighty acts of the Lord.

Walter Brueggemann notes,

When all of [the Lord's] miracles are forgotten, then one god looks as good as any other. (Texts, 519)

And we'll pursue anything or *anyone* who hints at being able to fulfill life ... and we will always end up disappointed.

Of course, the people are not the only ones to forget, who need to have their memory jogged.

It seems God has a problem with short-term memory, too.

God is obviously angry, and *mis*-identifies the people as those whom Moses "*brought up out of the land of Egypt*" (v.7).

But anger will do that: cloud the memory, distort it, even for the divine.

I wonder: could that be part of what we need to hear in this story?

Could it be that one lesson we learn from this story is that ... well, 'God has feelings too'? to put it simplistically.

There's a sense here that God feels deeply, and passionately, about the people. God cares. If God did not care, God would not be so angry. But God cares deeply and passionately about the people, and so God is deeply and passionately disappointed when the people "sin and reject me" (as another translation puts it).

God is in relationship with us -- committed, connected -- in such a way that what we do (or don't do) affects God.

The question is: does that make a difference in us?

Not as an invitation to exert control over God: 'Let's hurt God's feelings in order to influence God and get our way' -- No! But, will it make a difference in how we act and how we choose and how we live to know that the God who freed us from our 'Egypt', the God who is kind and gracious and merciful toward us, the God who provides for us, who is present with us is disappointed, and even hurt and angry, when we act and choose -- and remember -- wrongly?

There's another story that speaks of God's disappointment.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry [to have] made humankind on the earth, and [grieved in God's] heart. (Genesis 6:5-6-nrsv)

The beginning of the story of the great flood. Yes, "Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord" (v.8-nrsv) and, per God's instructions, builds an ark. But the flood still comes, raining for 40 days and 40 nights, the flood waters covering the earth for over 150 days. And in the midst of this devastation, there's this wonderful turn in the story. Walter Brueggemann identifies it as the crux (crucial turning point) of the story.

But God remembered Noah. (Gen.8:1-nrsv)

That's what turns that story around: God remembered.

It just seems God needed a nudge to do the same in our story.

For it is Moses that reminds God exactly who "brought the people up out of the land of Egypt" (v.11), "with great power and a mighty hand" no less.

It is Moses that reminds God of the origin of the covenant: that promise of "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky" and a "land...to possess for all time," (v.13) to "make...a great nation" (v.10). It was with "Abraham, Isaac, and Israel" (v.13) that God initiated this promise, not Moses.

So the LORD relented and did not bring on the people the disaster the Lord had threatened. (v.14)

Numerous translations say, "changed God's mind."

Many people have difficulty with thinking of God as 'changing God's mind'. 'Why does God need to change God's mind?'

Yet there are other stories that speak of God's changing God's mind: when God is sorry to have made people in the story of Noah and the flood, as we mentioned earlier; when God is sorry to have made Saul king over the people (I Samuel 15:35); when God talks to Abraham about a visit to Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham pushes God, "What if only 50 righteous people are found there? What if only 40, or 30, or 20, or 10?" (see Genesis 18:22-32)

Could it be that God takes our relationship so seriously that God is willing to take us into account when making a decision, when choosing a course of action?

As David Bender notes,

Perhaps God is so serious about God's relationship with humanity that God might give a decision a second thought. (Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective)

James Newsome offers another, related, tack:

The point is not that [God] is indecisive, but that [God's] justice is tempered with mercy, and that when the two qualities clash the former yields before the latter. (Texts 517)

Mercy wins out. When push comes to shove -- and believe you me, I'm sure there are many times when we push (and shove) God's buttons -- but when push comes to shove, it is not God's anger that wins out but God's mercy -- even through a cross.

Mercy wins out.
I wonder if that was what Moses was counting on.
I wonder if that was what Moses remembered when he stepped between a recalcitrant people and an angry God.
Gutsy move, don't you think?
And a move he could make only because he remembered, and remembered well.
'Excuse me, God, but I seem to remember that YOU were the one who delivered the people from Egypt.'

Right memory gives Moses the courage to speak out (and to "*stand in the way*" --Psalm 106:23).

And I would suggest right memory can alleviate anxiety and impatience. When I remember how God has seen me through before, perhaps I will be more patient and less anxious in a difficult time, even though I have a hard time seeing God present, at work.

And I would suggest right memory can mitigate anger and disappointment. When I remember how gracious and merciful God has been with me in my waywardness, perhaps I will be more merciful toward others in theirs.

*Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord
or fully declare God's praise? (v.2)*

the psalmist asks.

Surely only those who remember those mighty acts and remember them rightly.

"Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord?"

I suppose it is

*...those who act justly,
who always do what is right (v.3)*

(and do so) precisely because they remember the mighty acts of the Lord on their behalf; because they remember the gracious work of "*the God who saved them*" (v.21).

And in gratitude, they give of themselves in praise to God.

In gratitude, they give of themselves to emulate in their lives the very grace and mercy they have experienced from the Lord who "*is good,*" whose "*steadfast love endures forever*" (v.1).

So, it appears we too would do well to remember, and to remember well.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Hear us, O God...
People: ...your mercy is great.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Traditional)*

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

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Gracious Lord, we thank you for your blessings to us. We bask in your bounty. We rejoice in your mercy. Accept our thanks and praise. Accept also the offering of our gifts. By your wisdom and your power, use us, and our gifts, to share the joy of your kingdom, the peace of your presence, and the grace of your good news. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord” GtG 707

One: Take thou our minds, dear Lord,

All: we humbly pray;

One: give us the mind of Christ each passing day;

**All: teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
grant us in all our thoughts to honor thee.**

One: Take thou our hearts, O Christ,

All: they are thine own;

One: come thou within our souls and claim thy throne;

**All: help us to shed abroad thy deathless love;
use us to make the earth like heaven above.**

One: Take thou our wills, Most High!

All: Hold thou full sway;

have in our inmost souls thy perfect way;

One: guard thou each sacred hour from selfish ease;

All: guide thou our ordered lives as thou dost please.

One: Take thou ourselves, O Lord, heart, mind, and will;

All: through our surrendered souls thy plans fulfill.

One: We yield ourselves to thee:

All: time, talents, all;

One: we hear,

All: and henceforth heed, thy sovereign call.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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