

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 119)*

One: Happy are those who walk in the way of the Lord,
All: **who seek God with their whole hearts.**
One: Come, let us worship the Lord our God.

***OPENING HYMN** "Teach Us, O God" [*Tune: GtG 269*]

1. Teach us, O God, your statutes,
That we may keep your law,
For you alone are holy --
You fill our lives with awe.
In covenant, we serve you
And seek your way to find.
Go with us in our struggles
To live your love most kind.

2. As stewards of your mysteries,
As servants called to bring
Your light to things now hidden,
We would your praises sing.
You turn us from our striving
For things that pass away,
To sharing with our neighbors
The goods that we survey.

3. Let love of neighbor send us
To go the extra mile,
To pray for those who hate us,
Who slander and revile.

(continued...)

**May we your justice render
In true equality,
While turning from all vengeance
To generosity.**

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of compassion, have mercy upon us. You have given us your statutes, but we follow our own desires. We know of your laws, yet we try to justify our own way. You desire obedience, we practice rebellion. You offer blessing, we search for scapegoats. Make us mindful of how we disorder your intentions. Help us, O God, to judge ourselves aright and to show mercy to others, as we in turn look to you for mercy and forgiveness. . . .

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(based on Psalm 103)*

One: “The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”
Friends, God who is just and merciful
reproves our sinful ways,
offers the grace of repentance,
and frees us to live as God’s beloved children.
In the name of Jesus Christ,
know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

All: **Thanks be to God!**

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 READING Matthew 5:21-48

MATTHEW 5:21-48 (various)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone angry with their brother or sister will be subject to judgment; and anyone who says to their

brother or sister, 'You idiot,' will be subject to the council; and anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be subject to the fire of hell. ²³ Therefore, if you are about to offer your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Settle matters quickly with your opponent while you are still together on the way, or your opponent may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I say to you, you will never get out of there until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to go to hell .

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife for any cause other than sexual unfaithfulness causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but do what you have vowed to the Lord to do.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by earth, for it is the resting place for God's feet; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your Yes mean Yes, and your No mean No. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to take you to court to sue you for your shirt, let them have your coat as well. ⁴¹ And if someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with them two. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn your back on the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what is there extraordinary about that? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore, you will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

It is important for us to remember, as we read and hear these words, that immediately before these words, Jesus talked about the importance of the Law and the prophets; and he affirmed that he did not come to do away with them, but to fulfill them.

“But I say to you...” he says time and time again.

He seeks to share a deeper understanding of the Law and its intent: a fuller understanding.

But still, as we read these words and hear them, they can seem too much like a list of ‘Thou shall’s and ‘Thou shalt not’s.

And the illustrations of what we are not to do are all too easy.
And the illustrations of how we fall short are far too easy.

But that maybe the wrong way to look at this passage.

I get the sense of the challenge to do better and to be better.
But where is also the invitation? In many ways, the good news?
Could it be in hearing not so much the negative as the positive?

We get not murdering; we understand that.

But then to hear all that about anger just seems impossible. Yet if we could get and hear that positive aspect, maybe we could..

Well, think of it this way. All too often when we are angry with someone, we are pushing them away, we keep them at arm’s length. Too often we de-humanize them and stereotype them: the ‘other’ with whom we’re angry.

But we’re called to affirm the worth of another – to affirm them and claim them as a fellow human being – and to see that value for everyone.

Is our anger getting in the way of affirming that?

And we probably get that whole story about adultery, and even divorce.

That sense of lusting after somebody, again, devalues the other: turns them into a “piece of meat,” a tool for me to use for my own pleasure.

And yet, we are called to value that individual and value that relationship, and work for the good of that relationship. Not to discard that relationship or discard that person. But to work to affirm that person as a child of God and the importance of that relationship.

Which is the focus of so much of what Jesus says: our relationships with others. He speaks so much of those relationships, and asks us to focus on that.

Even making it worthwhile to work for the good of another even when they injure us, even when they harm us, and maybe continue to do so.

But again, we look around us – we look the other person in the eye – and we see that here is someone that God created, here is someone that God cares for. Should we not care for them as

well? and lift them up and seek to nurture them, and heal our relationship, and work for their well-being and their good?

But it may go even deeper than that. And to go even deeper, we have to start at the beginning – which in this case means we have to start at the end of our passage.

You remember those last words we read:

“You will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Now we hear that word “perfect” and we think of it in terms of never making a mistake. You know, the perfect record for the year: never making a mistake.

But the word actually refers more to a sense of fulfillment and completion: a sense of fullness and wholeness and focus, and even loyalty to.

And the truth of it is, as Jesus says these words, he is lifting up for us the importance of, the vitality of God’s character.

This is who God is.

And this is what we are to be like.

We are supposed to reflect God’s character – God’s nature – in our work and in our relationships and in our lives.

And then maybe we begin to see how God’s character is reflected in the very words spoken and the situations described.

-where maybe we are the ones murderously angry (even sometimes towards God)...but God does not respond to us in like manner.

-where maybe we are the ones seeking retaliation against others...but God does not respond in kind, even though God might be justified in doing so.

-And yes, all too often, we are the ones who hate our enemies – when in fact we are an ‘enemy’ as well – and God still makes the sun rise on us and the rain to fall on us as well.

“You will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Whole, complete, and unconditional in love for us.

Several different sources share these words in this way:

-“Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” (Common English Bible)

-“There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.” (Revised English Bible)

-“You are to be all-embracing in your love, in imitation of God, whose love embraces all.” (Douglas Hare, Interpretation series)

Where God sees us, not through the lens of murderous anger, but affirming our worth and working for our well-being.

Where God sees us, not as a “piece of meat,” but as a whole, beautiful human being created in God’s own image.

Where God sees us, not as a discardable entity in the relationship, even though our unfaithfulness mar the relationship, but God yearns to maintain and rebuild and heal that relationship.

Where God sees us, and our words – and God’s words as well – not as empty, but whole, purposeful, meaningful; and indeed God speaks to us meaningfully and faithfully.

Where God does not seek retribution or retaliation, but wholeness and reconciliation.

Where God does not hate us but loves us, even though we too often be enemies.

Though we still end up with that “*You will be perfect.*”

But I want to suggest to you that we end up there still, but with a difference.

For these words are spoken to us by Christ, whom we know as our Lord.

And they are spoken with authority. It is one of the keys of these words: that Jesus speaks these words with authority, as the people recognize, “*as one having authority and not as their scribes*” (7:29), but something different.

Jesus, in essence, says to the people, “This is God’s way; this is God’s character. Let me show you the way, and let me walk with you in this way.”

For we are called to be merciful, just as God is merciful.

And we cannot do that...except that, in Christ, God is merciful to us.

And we are called to reflect the character of God in all our relationships.

And, in truth, the only way we can do that – the only way we are motivated to do that, the only way we are empowered to do that – is because of God’s character of grace and mercy and love reaching out to us and embracing us in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so I am reminded of those words we read in one of John’s letters, where he says very clearly,

We love, because God first loved us. (I John 4:19)

And so we do not look upon another in anger, because God, before then, has not looked in anger upon us, but in love and compassion.

And so we do not speak words that mean nothing that seem to require some oath to support them, but we speak plainly and honestly because God has spoken plainly and honestly and faithfully to us in God’s word.

And in that – in that God has first shared with us and loved us and cared for us and sought to reconcile with us and affirmed us and lifted us up – in that God has first done that for us;

and in that Christ shows us that way and walks with us in that way;

then we are empowered to be complete, to be “perfect,” and unconditional, even as God is complete and unconditional in love and care and grace for us.

And when we realize that we’re going to have a hard time with that;

when we realize, quite honestly, that we can’t do that...without help;

then let us pray, Thanks be to God that the very one who invites us to reflect the character of God, is the very one who gives his life for us that his life can be a part of our lives, and his life

can imbue and empower our lives, so that his life can guide and direct and shape and mold our lives to be perfect and complete...as is his.

***HYMN** “Help Us Accept Each Other” GtG 754

- 1. Help us accept each other
as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother,
each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord, among us
and bring us to believe
we are ourselves accepted,
and meant to love and live.**

- 2. Teach us, O Lord, your lessons,
as in our daily life
we struggle to be human
and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people,
for all, not just for some,
to love them as we find them
or as they may become.**

- 3. Let your acceptance change us,
so that we may be moved
in living situations
to do the truth in love;
to practice your acceptance
until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness,
and laughter's healing art.**

- 4. Lord, for today's encounters
with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance,
for justice and for bread,
we need new eyes for seeing,
new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us; make us one!**

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***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

One: Merciful God, hear our prayer...
All: ...and turn our hearts and lives to you.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

O God, you rule over all. The sun rises on the just and the unjust. You care for all. We lift up our offerings to you in faith. Let that which we offer be in response to your incredible mercy; let that which we do be dependent on your grace. Accept what we bring as signs of our endurance in faith; and use them, and us, to further Christ's ministry and make your way known. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Come! Live in the Light!" GtG 749
(We Are Called)

**1. Come! Live in the light!
Shine with the joy
and the love of the Lord!
We are called
to be light for the kingdom,
to live in the freedom
of the city of God.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

**2. Come! Open your heart!
Show your mercy
to all those in fear!
We are called
to be hope for the hopeless
so hatred and violence
will be no more.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

(continued...)

**3. Sing! Sing a new song!
Sing of that great day
when all will be one!
God will reign,
and we'll walk with each other
as sisters and brothers
united in love.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

***RESPONSE** “May the God of Hope Go with Us” GtG 765

**May the God of hope go with us every day,
filling all our lives with love and joy and peace.
May the God of justice speed us on our way,
bringing light and hope to every land and race.
Praying, let us work for peace;
singing, share our joy with all;
working for a world that's new,
faithful when we hear Christ's call.**

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POSTLUDE

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