

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, AUGUST 20, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**20<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: Come, to give thanks and sing God's praise.  
All: **Come, to hear God's voice and grow in God's way.**  
One: Come, in anticipation and eagerness.  
All: **We come to worship the Lord our God.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" GtG 475

1. **Come, thou Fount of every blessing;  
tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
streams of mercy, never ceasing,  
call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet,  
sung by flaming tongues above;  
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,  
mount of God's unchanging love!**
2. **Here I raise my Ebenezer;  
hither by thy help I'm come;  
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,  
safely to arrive at home.  
Jesus sought me when a stranger,  
wandering from the fold of God;  
he, to rescue me from danger,  
interposed his precious blood.**
3. **O to grace how great a debtor  
daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let that grace now, like a fetter,  
bind my wandering heart to thee.**

*(continued...)*

**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart; O take and seal it;  
seal it for thy courts above.**

Words: Robert Robinson, 1758, alt.

Music: NETTLETON, Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, 1813  
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## **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Dear God,  
you are the source of all good things,  
yet we squander those blessings.  
We hoard them,  
holding on to them as our very own.  
We do not share as you have shared with us,  
and so your grace is not evident in our lives.  
Forgive us, merciful God.  
Open our lives to your giving.  
Transform us as your people.  
And help us to love as you have loved us  
that our lives may testify  
to your abounding grace  
though Jesus Christ. 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!**

## 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 15:21-28

MATTHEW 15:21-28 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." <sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." <sup>26</sup> He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

#### SERMON "Pry Open" by Pastor Bill Vincent

This is a tough nut to crack. The picture of Jesus we have in this story does not fit what we think of him in other places. The first time the woman speaks, he ignores her. After the disciples come to him and complain, asking him to send her away, he says he hasn't come for her, only for "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" When she speaks a second time, he insults her by calling her a "dog." Doesn't sound like the Jesus I know. Only after she has demonstrated persistence in the face of it all and a keenness of wit that turns his own phrase to her advantage – only then does he help her.

What's going on? Is Jesus testing her? Is he trying to teach the disciples? Is he unsure himself?

Unfortunately, those specific questions we will not answer today. For, I'm not altogether sure myself. And often, most of the answers others suggest seem to be pure conjecture. We simply don't know.

So, yes, there's a lot of uncertainty about this passage.

It's a tough nut to crack.

Even so, this story teaches us some things.

You see, we may have a hard time prying open the meaning of this text.

But maybe what the text is trying to do – and God through it – is to pry us open in ways that we need.

For, when all said and done, the woman receives help. We may not understand how Jesus could be so rude, so it seems. Yet, when all is said and done, the woman does receive help and her daughter is healed ... in spite of Jesus' apparent resistance, and the disciples' definite resistance.

Eduard Schweizer ponders:

**Is Matthew also thinking of disciples in his own period who acted this way?** (*The Good News According to Matthew*, p.329)

Could God be speaking to us when we act this way, like the disciples?

We try to grasp so tightly in our hands the blessings that God has given us, and we try to keep them to ourselves: "God gave them to me; they're mine!"

We try to keep God to ourselves, and conform God to our image: "Surely God is like us!"

Maybe through this story God attempts to pry open those hands to share, tries to pry open that heart, so that more blessings might flow, through us and to us.

It's not like we're screening applicants for "Person of the Week." We are sharing the grace that we ourselves have known, experienced, by which we have been touched and transformed and redeemed.

Our stance should not be an interrogation: "Do you have the right credentials for being here? Do you like the same hymns we like? Do you dress the same way we do? Do you sound like us? Do you fit in?"

Our stance should be, in the words of the hymn,

**O to grace how great a debtor**

**Daily I'm constrained to be!**

("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," words by Robert Robinson, 1758)

You see, we are all in need of mercy. Remembering that, we then reach out to others in mercy. As Shakespeare reminds us,

**...we do pray for mercy,**

**And that same prayer doth teach us all to render**

**The deeds of mercy.**

("The Merchant of Venice" IV i 184)

For there is no one who is outside the realm of Jesus's help and compassion, even though the way may be difficult.

For,

**There's a wideness in God's mercy,**

**Like the wideness of the sea;**

...

**For the love of God is broader**

**Than the measures of [our] mind;....**

("There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," words by Frederick W. Faber, 1854)

So, who are we to restrict the grace that God gives so freely?

A story from a while ago told of a young student from the nearby college who came to worship one Sunday at the old, stately church near the campus. He dressed casually, as college students can be prone to dress: a T-shirt, jeans that were ragged at the bottom, sandals. When he arrived, worship was already well on its way. This young man started walking down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. As he continued down the aisle, the congregation settled into an uneasy silence. But, look as he might, he could not find an empty seat. So, in his casual manner, when he had come to the front of the aisle with no luck in finding a seat, he simply plopped down and sat cross-legged on the floor. The congregation was aghast. One of the ushers was an older, stately gentleman who always dressed in a coat and tie, always prim and proper. And this man started down the aisle, walking slowly with his cane. As he did, the congregation quietly murmured. Everyone knew what was to come, and no one would blame him. It simply was not done, disrupting worship so, sitting down on the floor, coming to church dressed in such a shabby manner. So everyone waited for the gentleman to escort the student to the back, or even out of the sanctuary altogether. The older gentleman had reached the front where the student was sitting and all waited to hear what he would say. Instead, they heard nothing. But, with no small difficulty, the old gentleman put his cane aside, made his way down to the floor, and sat there cross-legged beside the young student, to join him in worship.

Pry us open, O God, to embrace others – all others – in your name.

And maybe this story might also pry us open to the wonder and working of God, like the woman herself.

She comes with expectancy: trusting, believing that Jesus can and will help her.

George Buttrick remarks,

**The expectancy that hopes great things of God is passport to the kingdom.** (*Interpreter's Bible* (1951), vol.7, p.442)

Do we have such expectancy?

Or do we all too often expect ... nothing. Maybe we've expected great things before, and we've been disappointed too often.

Yet maybe our disappointment comes from being expectant in too confined a manner: looking for God to answer our prayer in just such a narrow, specific, particular way.

"God, I have this meeting on Wednesday. Could you please heal me of this cold by Tuesday so I have time to prepare?"

"God, I grieve this fractured friendship. Would you please change the other person?"

"God, we ask you to transform us as a congregation. But don't make things too uncomfortable."

Is our vision so narrow, our expectation so pre-defined that we miss the new possibility God makes available to us, and then believe our prayer hasn't been answered at all?

We miss God's working in our midst, wondrous and great, even when it occurs right before our eyes, right under our noses; for it didn't come the way we expected.

The man stayed with his house as the flood waters rose, for he trusted that God would save him. The waters rose further, and he was forced to go to the second floor. A boat came by and the people begged him to get in with them. But he responded, "No, I trust that God will save me." The flood waters rose still further until finally he was forced up on the roof. A helicopter came by and, with a loudspeaker, begged him to take hold of the rope and be pulled to safety.

To which he replied, "No, I believe God will take care of me." Eventually, the waters rose above the roof, swept the man away, and he drowned. When he arrived in heaven, the man angrily confronted God: "I trusted you to save me, but you let me down." To which God replied, "I sent you a boat and a helicopter, what more did you want?"

"God, transform us as a congregation. And if it's uncomfortable, that's okay."

"God, with this fractured friendship, maybe I'm the one that needs to change."

And regarding that illness, maybe we'll remember Paul, who prayed three times to God about his "*thorn in flesh*" only to receive this reply:

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* (II Corinthians 12:9)

What is our expectancy like?

Are we open to God in the ordinary and seemingly unsurprising? And open to God's spectacular work, even in the seemingly unspectacular ... and even in the irritating?

Wendy Miller shares this story:

**I remember a journey by train from New York City to Boston, and then on to Portland, Maine. I was looking forward to a time away in Maine to do some writing and to enjoy some quiet walks on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. As an introvert I need regular doses of solitude and was thankful as I settled into my seat that no one was sitting beside me. But soon a woman entered the railway car and sat down in that empty seat. Within seconds she turned to me and began to talk. Her voice was animated, her tone insistent.**

...

**Like Jesus, I did not reply to the woman in the seat beside me. However, I am sure that the motives behind my silence were not holy. I was hoping she would notice that I was reading and would realize that I did not want to engage in conversation. ...**

**The woman seated beside me keeps talking, and I begin to sense that she is in some kind of need. However, I hold on to my book, and keep reading. ...**

**[Finally] Embarrassed by my resistance and moved by my travel companion's persistence, I turn my body and my attention toward her:**

**"My mother died," she says, "and I'm on my way to take care of her furniture and her apartment. My sister died too, two years ago, so I alone am left to do the work."**

**Now I understand the stress within her voice, her need to talk, her need to be heard. I lay my book aside and listen. ...**

**My time apart ceases to be a shelter for myself at this point. Instead these hours become a shelter for my neighbor and her need to be received and heard.**

**Love and compassion begin to flow as my resistant walls are let down, laid aside along with my book. My need for solitude fades and is forgotten.**

**("Spiritual Formation: Compassion empowers us for mission," Lectionary Homiletics, August 1999, p.8)**

Strange and wonderful how it can work like that: how being open – albeit reluctantly – to another made her open to God. And even the reverse: how being open to God – though not in the way expected – ended up making her open to another.

There are times – too many – when we are all too readily closed to those around us: to their needs, to their cry for help, to the common bond that connects us all. And too many times when we are closed to our God, whether in the ordinary or the extraordinary, in the expected or the unexpected.

A woman came to Jesus and said, *“Have mercy on me!”*

Maybe with words such as these God can, and will, pry us open to discover our ministry to others and they to us. And may God pry us open to re-discovering the wonders of God's grace in the grand, and the ordinary ... and even in the irritating.

**\*HYMN** “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” GtG 435

- 1. There's a wideness in God's mercy,  
like the wideness of the sea.  
There's a kindness in God's justice,  
which is more than liberty.  
There is no place where earth's sorrows  
are more felt than up in heaven.  
There is no place where earth's failings  
have such kindly judgment given.**
  
- 2. For the love of God is broader  
than the measures of the mind.  
And the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.  
If our love were but more faithful,  
we would gladly trust God's Word,  
and our lives reflect thanksgiving  
for the goodness of our Lord.**

Words: Frederick William Faber, 1854, alt.

Music: IN BABILONE, Dutch melody; arr. Julius Rontgen, ca. 1906

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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from *“A Declaration of Faith”*)

**God created human beings with a need for community  
and with freedom to enter into it  
by responding to their Maker with grateful obedience  
and to one another with love and helpfulness.**

*(continued...)*

**We believe God sends us  
to risk our own peace and comfort  
in compassion for our neighbors.  
We are to give to them and receive from them,  
accepting everyone we meet as a person;  
to be sensitive to those who suffer in body or mind;  
to help and accept help  
in ways that affirm dignity and responsibility.  
We must not limit our compassion to those we judge deserving,  
for we ourselves do not deserve the compassion of God.**

**We do not fully comprehend who God is or how God works.  
God's reality far exceeds all our words can say.  
The Lord's requirements are not always what we think is best.  
The Lord's care for us is not always what we want.  
God comes to us on God's own terms  
and is able to do far more than we ask or think.**

“A Declaration of Faith” is Copyright 1977, 1991, the Office of the General Assembly,  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); adopted (1977) “as a contemporary statement of faith, a  
reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration, with the clear understanding that”  
it is not approved as a part of the *Book of Confessions*.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

One: Loving God...  
All: ...hear our prayer.

## **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, you have given us more mercy  
than we could imagine  
and more blessings than we deserve.  
Receive now these gifts as tokens of our gratitude to you,  
that your mercy may be multiplied  
and your blessings abound  
to embrace all those in need. Amen.**

## SENDING

**\*CLOSING HYMN** “Open My Eyes, That I May See” GtG 451

- 1. Open my eyes, that I may see  
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
that shall unclasp and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for thee,  
ready, my God, thy will to see.  
Open my eyes; illumine me, Spirit divine!**
- 2. Open my ears, that I may hear  
voices of truth thou sendest clear.  
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,  
everything false will disappear.  
Silently now I wait for thee,  
ready, my God, thy will to see.  
Open my ears; illumine me, Spirit divine!**
- 3. Open my mouth, and let me bear  
gladly the warm truth everywhere.  
Open my heart, and let me prepare  
love with thy children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for thee,  
ready, my God, thy will to see.  
Open my heart; illumine me, Spirit divine!**

Words and Music (OPEN MY EYES): Clara H. Scott, 1895  
*Public Domain*

**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

**POSTLUDE**

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