

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**TWENTIETH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: With heart and soul and voices we come to worship.

All: **We seek to love and serve the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.**

One: So come to give thanks and praise.

All: **We come to rejoice in the goodness of the Lord our God.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** "O God, Who Gives Us Life" GtG 53

**1. O God, who gives us life and breath,  
who shapes us in the womb,  
who guards our lives from birth to death,  
then leads us from the tomb:  
deliver us from fears that kill  
the life we have from you.  
Help us to know your Spirit still  
is making all things new.**

**2. O God, who calls your people out  
to venture and to dare,  
to plumb the bleak abyss of doubt  
and find you even there:  
when we despair in wandering  
through wastes of empty lies,  
refresh us with the living spring  
of hope that never dies.**

**3. O God of covenant and law,  
revealed in cloud and flame,  
your mighty deeds evoke our awe;  
we dare not speak your name.**

*(continued...)*

**Yet we by faith are drawn to you  
and will your people prove,  
as on our hearts you write anew  
the covenant of love.**

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Music: NOEL, English melody; arr. Arthur S. Sullivan, 1874  
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**UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION “Forgive Us, Lord” GtG 431**

**Forgive us, Lord.  
Forgive us, Lord.**

*1. For grievance and injustice:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**  
*Aloofness and indifference:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**

**Forgive us, Lord.**

*2. For weakness and transgression:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**  
*Resistance and rebellion:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**

**Forgive us, Lord.**

*3. In your eternal mercy:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**  
*In your sustaining grace:*  
**forgive us, Lord.**

**Forgive us, Lord.**

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**SILENT CONFESSION**

## ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from II Corinthians 5)*

- One: "The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died."  
All: **"And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."**  
One: Because Christ died, we receive forgiveness for our sins. Because he was raised from the dead, we receive new life in him.  
All: **"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"**  
One: So rejoice and be glad, and believe the good news of God's grace!  
All: **For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, we are loved, we are given new life!**

## THE PEACE

- One: The peace of Christ be with you all.  
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 Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

MARK 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

<sup>1</sup> Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) <sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
<sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

<sup>8</sup> "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." ...

<sup>14</sup> Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup> there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." ... <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit,

*debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."*

## **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON** by Pastor Bill Vincent

We see it every time when we head to, or back from, North Carolina.

As we approach Lexington, Kentucky, you can begin to see on either side of the interstate these beautiful 'horse farms'. And you see these beautiful fences that line the highway and line the lanes and line the fields where the horses graze and romp. Beautiful fences, most of them white but some are natural wood. They tend to be fairly uniform in design, almost as if there are some 'horse farm' Home Owners Association rules stating what kind of fence you can use. Probably costs an arm and a leg to put up the fence and maintain the fence. But we all know why they're there. Of course, they probably could accomplish the same thing with a cheaper type of fence. But then it wouldn't look as nice. And the neighbors might complain.

But I digress.

Or do I?

Fences are what Jesus is talking about...though he doesn't ever use the word.

To begin with, we may need to divest ourselves of the ingrained notion that the Pharisees and scribes were naturally nasty and evil characters: no-gooders with naturally evil intentions about them.

That was not the case. In fact, this issue of the tradition of the elders has good intentions written all over it.

(Of course, we know where that road leads, don't we?)

The specific example has to do with "purity laws" and regulations: How to keep yourself pure before the holy God; how to make yourself presentable to God; how to approach the holy God by giving yourself (at least) a modicum of holiness yourself.

So that what we're talking about is this ritual sense of purity as we approach God. And we're NOT talking about hygiene. This washing of hands and pots and pans has nothing to do with getting rid of germs and infections; they weren't aware of that at all.

But they're talking about this presenting yourself before God, this God who is holy. So we need to prepare ourselves to come before God.

But there's a deeper question surrounding this issue. It has to do with the commandments. For are they not a way of describing how we are to live before God?

So you have these commandments that the people are very aware of. But as time went on, there were always these questions that came up.

For if one of the commandments is 'you shall not work on the sabbath, but keep the sabbath holy', what exactly does that mean? In this particular situation, what does it mean to keep the sabbath holy? what does it mean not to work?

If I have been out in the field working and have gotten dirty, and I don't know if maybe I've touched something that was unclean that made me ritually unclean, how do I prepare myself to make sure I'm ready to come before the holy God?

So, over time, there arose these traditions and regulations that sought – sincerely so – to discern what actions, what choices, what manner of living truly fulfilled the commandment in question. “This is how you make sure you're keeping the commandments.”

This tradition that was actually there to help the people to follow God and obey God's commands; to make sure they didn't fall away or take a misstep. This was the “tradition of the elders.”

This tradition – these traditions – sought to put a fence around the law or commandment in question. In other words, if I abide by the parameters of the fence, then I can be fairly sure that I will not mistakenly break the law.

I experienced an instance of this just this past Friday.

You see, each week, I try to go to both churches and I double check the laptop computers we use each Sunday to be sure they are ready and prepared to work properly for Sunday worship. What I'm trying to avoid is, turning on the computer on Sunday morning, and having it tell me it needs to update, or do a scan; and then off it goes and does its thing without so much as asking whether or not I want it to scan or update; and while it's scanning or updating, you and I are held hostage and without the use of the computer.

Tell me who here hasn't had that experience.

Well, there were some glitches that I was experiencing on Friday with one of the laptops. And I was getting to the point, in my frustration, of deciding, “Okay, we'll get this fixed, and then, to be sure this never happens again, no one else can touch the computer!”

Again, tell me who here hasn't been to that point.

But notice what happens when we do that: we fence in – or fence off – the computer from just about everyone, so that it is no longer being used as it was intended: as a useful tool to sort through information, and to be able to present and to develop and to explore.

Trying to protect the computer, we fence it off and diminish its use and its usefulness. For now, no one can use it...unless they have permission...unless they have special training...unless they know the appropriate protocol...unless those in authority are watching over their shoulder.

What happens, too, is that not only does the fence restrict and restrain – and constrict – that which the fence “fences in” – or “out.” We also begin to focus more attention on the fence than on what's inside the fence. We put more attention on the fence; we place more value on the fence. For the fence is supposedly protecting what's valuable, which makes the fence valuable. And in time, in our eyes, makes the fence more valuable than the “horse.”

Now that's a cock-eyed perspective, isn't it?

To place more value on the tradition of defiled (or undefiled) hands, than on the true “cleanliness” before God.

Now, I'm not saying the Pharisees and scribes – and others – were intentionally deciding that they were going to place more value on the fence around the law than the law itself.

But I am saying that's where we tend to end up: when we are so convinced that we have figured out how to protect God, how to protect God's way, how to protect God's will and work and coming kingdom – that we place ultimate value on our fences...and ignore, overlook, (or at least) devalue the true will and work and kingdom that we sought to protect.

As an example, we could refer to the out-of-fashion “blue laws” (that some of you might remember) that sought to protect the idea and observance of “the Sabbath” so that you can't work – you can't do this, that, or the other – on Sunday.

But maybe we should look at an example that is even older – and yet more contemporary as well.

For what about our understanding of this table [--communion table--] and who is welcome, and how? Again, the term is often used about “fencing the table”: somehow determining certain standards necessary for someone to come to the communion table and receive the elements of bread and cup and enjoy the communion with Christ and with one another.

-Do I have to believe that the bread really becomes Christ's body and the wine (or non-fermented substitute) really becomes Christ's blood, before I can come to the table and eat and drink?

-Do I have to believe that they are only symbols before I can truly participate?

-Do I have to demonstrate certain moral standards by known moral behavior, before I can sit down at the table, and sit down with you?

-Do I have to adhere to a particular statement of belief – in other words, do I have to believe like you do – before I am welcomed?

But I wonder, too, if we could go further – and more controversially, I might add – and suggest that there may be certain one-issue stances that seek the same fencing of the table – or the fencing of the fellowship, the congregation, the community...the kingdom.

-That the only way truly to be a Christian is to be...pro-life.

-That the only way truly to be a Christian is to be...pro-choice.

-That the only way truly to be a Christian is to be...pro-Israel (the present-day nation).

-That the only way truly to be a Christian is to be...pro-Palestinian.

Now, these are important issues, yes. And I am not meaning to downplay their significance.

But when these issues become more important than the God we profess stands behind them, then we have a problem.

Then we have fallen in love with our fence.

We have fallen in love with our traditions, our customs, the way things have always been done. And when this happens our hearts are completely messed up, and we are running after the wrong things, loving the wrong things, in the wrong order, with the wrong priority.

As Augustine reminds us, that **“We sin when our loves are out of order.”**

([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/augustine-sin-quote\\_us\\_56980d51e4b0778f46f8b931](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/augustine-sin-quote_us_56980d51e4b0778f46f8b931)) And our heart is out of order.

Intending to worship God, we instead set up barriers that distance us – and others – from God.

Desiring to serve God and God's will, we instead list prerequisites for who can – and who cannot – serve God appropriately; who is eligible...and who is not.

And we cherish those barriers and those prerequisites – this fence. For they give us a sense of clarity in a world that is all too often ambiguous. They give us a sense of control at a time when it seems like so much is out of our control. They give us a sense of accomplishment: we can pat ourselves on the back because (of course) we have met the appropriate requirements, for we're the ones who drew the line – we're the ones who erected the fence in the first place...right where we wanted it.

And suddenly – or subtly – we have created God in our own image. For we love ourselves – and our fences – more than we love God.

And indeed we honor God with our lips, but our hearts are in a different place altogether.

Jesus was right – surprise! surprise! – it all has to do with the heart.

Now, this is a tough passage to deal with, for it's far easier to hear the condemnation of hypocrisy (loving our fences before we love our God) – including in us – and the injunction to not be hypocritical, i.e., to do better.

And it's hard to hear the grace.

Yes, a harsh passage.

And Jesus himself seems to come across as harsh.

The Pharisees and scribes ask what seems to be a fairly simple question, and his first response is to call them hypocrites.

Why such a harsh response?

Perhaps because of this truth: that the more entrenched the disease, the more radical the remedy required.

*“Their hearts are far from me.”*

It is the disease of the heart that he addresses. And as we all know, that is difficult and tricky, and we have all tried to deal with that disease ourselves...all too often without success.

The root issue is not clean hands, or where we stand on a particular issue.

The root issue is the issue of the human heart.

And it requires a radical, drastic action to root out the root issue.

A radical, drastic action – like the death of an innocent man on a cross.

That's the good news we discern in the fuller context as we read further on in the gospel.

Jesus takes the radical step of the cross – giving of himself – that our diseased heart might be cured. That we might be given a new heart. That the law of God might be written on our heart.

For, yes, you see, this is not a new issue in Jesus' time. There are plenty of passages we can read in the Old Testament that speak of this issue.

Psalm 51:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

(51:10 NRSV)

Why make that prayer unless there is that need?

And that promise of God that, yes, the time will come when,

*says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts*

(Jeremiah 31:33 NRSV)

to change them, to transform them, to transform us.

And here we have this gospel: that good news that Jesus has come to do just that.

Can we hear that good news? and incorporate that good news? and have it make a difference in our lives, and in our heart?

But I have to make a side note that, as we read our story, yes, Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites. But I think it is important for us to recognize in our dealing with this issue, that is Jesus's response; that is not called upon to be our response. Jesus is in a position to make that response, to make that call. I am not.

So maybe I need to back off of my judgment of another's position or stance or life.

For I do not have the credentials, I do not have the sight, to call the spade a hypocrite.

God does. I do not.

But let me also lift up this before us.

Yes, this passage is harsh. Most of what it seems to say is, "Don't do that!" "Don't do this!" "Bad people!"

Do we really have to wait to read the rest of the gospel to hear the good news, to hear the grace?

I think not. For notice, Jesus continues to engage the Pharisees and scribes...and us.

And that is grace: that is that love at work, that is a deep caring.

For if Jesus did not care about the Pharisees and the scribes, he never would have responded – he never would have given them the time of day.

But he did respond. And in a way, he did give them the time of day, even offering them the time of their life, for it was the time that was their life...or could have been, had they responded rightly.

He kept taking their questions, and engaging them, even though his heart was grieved and even angered at the hardness...of their heart. (see Mk.3:5a)

Jesus kept coming to them, engaging them.

And he keeps coming to us as well...even in a passage that calls us hypocrites.

He continues to come to us and engage us, to call us and invite us.

He comes to us.  
Will we hear him?  
Will we receive him, even if he doesn't fit within our fence?

Jesus did not give up on the Pharisees and the scribes, and he does not give up on us.  
Hopefully – and with his help – we won't give up on him.

**\*HYMN** “Spirit, Open My Heart” GtG 692

*Refrain:*

**Spirit, open my heart  
to the joy and pain of living.  
As you love may I love,  
in receiving and in giving.  
Spirit, open my heart.**

**1. God, replace my stony heart  
with a heart that's kind and tender.  
All my coldness and fear  
to your grace I now surrender.**

*Refrain:*

**2. Write your love upon my heart  
as my law, my goal, my story.  
In each thought, word, and deed,  
may my living bring you glory.**

*Refrain:*

**3. May I weep with those who weep;  
share the joy of sister, brother.  
In the welcome of Christ,  
may we welcome one another.**

*Refrain:*

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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.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

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

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

One: God of mercy and grace...  
All: ...hear our prayer, and create in us a clean heart.

## **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.

*(continued...)*

**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*

**Living God, we thank you for your abundant gifts of life.  
Receive our offerings as tokens of our gratitude,  
and infuse them with life-giving power for those in need.  
With these gifts we dedicate ourselves  
to live in the truth of your word,  
and follow your commandments with sincere hearts;  
for the work and ministry of Christ in this world. Amen.**

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING HYMN** “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian” GtG 729

**1. Lord, I want to be a Christian  
in my heart, in my heart;  
Lord, I want to be a Christian  
in my heart.  
In my heart, (In my heart,  
in my heart, (in my heart,  
Lord, I want to be a Christian  
in my heart.**

**2. Lord, I want to be more loving  
in my heart, in my heart;  
Lord, I want to be more loving  
in my heart.  
In my heart, (In my heart,  
in my heart, (in my heart,  
Lord, I want to be more loving  
in my heart.**

*(continued...)*

**3. Lord, I want to be more holy  
in my heart, in my heart;  
Lord, I want to be more holy  
in my heart.  
In my heart, (In my heart,  
in my heart, (in my heart,  
Lord, I want to be more holy  
in my heart.**

**4. Lord, I want to be like Jesus  
in my heart, in my heart;  
Lord, I want to be like Jesus  
in my heart.  
In my heart, (In my heart,  
in my heart, (in my heart,  
Lord, I want to be like Jesus  
in my heart.**

Words and Music (I WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN): African American spiritual  
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**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

**POSTLUDE**

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