

July 18, 2021 – English Worship Service – 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Welcome & Invocation

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Welcome again to the second of our English-language worship services here at our temple. We have, what I hope to be a lovely service for you this afternoon. We are delighted that you took the time to be with us today.

Let us begin our worship with a brief moment of prayer:

Almighty God, in Jesus Christ you opened for us a new and living way into your presence. Give us pure hearts and constant wills to worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Hymn: Great is Thy Faithfulness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o73iLBWJ2Xo>

1. Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Refrain

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.
3. 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,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Praise (Adapted from Psalm 89:20-37)

I have found my servant David;
my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm shall also strengthen him.
My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him.
If his children forsake my law,
I will not remove my steadfast love.
I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that has gone forth from my lips.
His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.
It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.

First Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6

1 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. ²Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God!

Prayer of Confession (Unison)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In humility and faith, let us confess our sin to God.

Redeeming Lord, you call your church to live as your body, but we struggle to find our unity. Words and our actions serve our own ends, instead of your will. We magnify divisions between us and favor validation over the truth. Have mercy upon us, Lord. Gather your wayward flock. Conform our hearts and minds to your will, so that we may serve you together as one.

Silent Prayer

[Lord, continue to hear our prayer as we confess to you in silence...]

Assurance of Pardon

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. May the God of mercy, who forgives our sins, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. **Amen.**

Prayer for Illumination

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may find light, and in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of

the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Hymn: *Called as Partners in Christ's Service*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRsQnmE9aVc>

1. Called as partners in Christ's service
Called to ministries of grace
We respond with deep commitment
Fresh new lines of faith to trace
May we learn the art of sharing
Side by side and friend with friend
Equal partners in our caring
To fulfil God's chosen end.
2. Christ's example Christ's inspiring
Christ's clear call to work and worth
Let us follow never faltering
Reconciling folk on earth
Men and women richer poorer
All God's people young and old
Blending human skills together
Gracious gifts from God unfold.
3. Thus new patterns for Christ's mission
In a small or global sense
Help us bear each other's burdens
Breaking down each wall or fence
Words of comfort words of vision
Words of challenge said with care
Bring new power and strength for action
Make us colleagues free and fair.
4. So God grant us for tomorrow
Ways to order human life
That surround each person's sorrow
With a calm that conquers strife
Make us partners in our living
Our compassion to increase
Messengers of faith thus giving
Hope and confidence and peace.

Sermon: *Between the Lines*

What are we to do with impossible scripture passages? I'm not talking about passages that we struggle with; I'm talking about those which truly offend us – passages which demand far more from us than we are prepared to offer. The example I always think about is this: the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus declares, "*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*" Let's be honest: much of what Jesus tells us to do is difficult. Forgiving our enemies is difficult. Laying down our lives for another is difficult. But by asking us to give away everything we possess, it appears as if Jesus places discipleship far beyond our grasp. Forgiveness and laying down one's life for another are relatively easy (again let me say *relatively*) because we can always count on ourselves to do the right thing for someone else. But giving up all that we possess is even harder because this means trusting someone else to do the right thing for us.

It's fair to say that Christians can be somewhat selective when it comes to the interpretation of scripture. Some passages we take far too literally, while others we do not take literally enough. Many would-be evangelists do quite well for themselves by insisting that one must only interpret scripture in a literal, word-for-word fashion. They speak incessantly about various social, cultural and moral codes, but at the same time, they seem conveniently silent when it comes to Jesus' lessons about the dangers of wealth. My point is this: No human being follows scripture literally 100% of the time – even those who claim to do so. All reading is, by its nature, interpretation. We do not have the luxury of picking and choosing which passages we agree with most. The *complete* witness of scripture must become a catalyst for conversation if we are to read it faithfully.

It has been my experience that those who are most selective in their use of scripture often understand it the least. I have seen first-hand the damage which results when the gift of scripture is decidedly misused – when a narrow and dogmatic interpretation of scripture assumes priority over the purposes for which scripture was given. Scripture is the story of God's love and grace; therefore, all of its words must be understood in that context. Let it be known that those who divide the Word, divide the body. And while isolated scripture passages may support our argument in the short term, proper perspective must always be maintained: The most important theological concern of the New Testament epistles is not piety or morality or personal codes of conduct, rather, it is the preservation of the unity of the church. The interpretation of scripture, the moral standards to which we adhere, the rules we use to govern ourselves and the ministry of reconciliation to which we have been entrusted – all of these serve this same end. These are tools by which our unity in Christ is preserved.

Divisions within the church are, of course, nothing new. Many New Testament epistles were written to address divisions that were occurring within individual congregations at the time. The Letter to the Ephesians was written in Christianity's earliest days, when the church was escaping its Palestinian roots to establish itself across the Mediterranean world and beyond. So inevitably, with such a dramatic cultural and geographical shift, new challenges would present themselves. People would ask: Will the church be a Gentile institution, or a Jewish one? Some would claim that followers of Jesus Christ were to obey the Law and Jewish religious custom (just as Jesus had done), while others believed the church was to sever all ties with those who had rejected Christ and the Good News. Some were content to walk the middle ground between these two extremes, while others desired to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater to begin anew.

This identity crisis was a source of great tension within the early church, and it was being felt in a variety of communities, not just in Ephesus. The letter to the Ephesians is addressed to a church that was becoming increasingly separated by race, language, nationality and culture. Yet even so, the letter expresses a sincere trust in the power of reconciliation, that (in spite of their differences) each might welcome the other as a vital part of the body of Christ. "*For [Christ Jesus] is our peace,*" the letter reads. "*In his flesh he has made both groups into one...so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two.*"

Ephesians makes the case that both Jew and Gentile would need one another if they were to become this “*one new humanity*” of which the letter speaks. Gentiles must recognize how they have been welcomed into this covenant community by means of an act of great hospitality. Likewise, Jewish Christians must also recognize that they cannot discover their identity as a chosen people apart from the inclusion of their Gentile brothers and sisters. Through his sacrifice upon the cross, Christ disclosed the nature of our shared brokenness, and brought us together as one by means of a common grace, because love and grace provide the context for our identity as a people. “*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,*” writes the author, “*but you are citizens...of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*”

With these words, Ephesians presents us with a new vision to guide the church – an odd collection of spiritual misfits who have received a new calling and a common destiny through the divine providence of God. Through the love and grace of Christ, we have become a new people, a new race and a new society, and wherever this destiny takes us, it takes us together. Therefore, in spite of our many differences, we remain bound to one another as fellow citizens within the Commonwealth of God. If the church is ever going to go anywhere, it must do so as one.

Needless to say, over the centuries, the church has not exactly lived up to this ideal. The history of Christianity is one marked by disagreement, division and discord. Now don't get me wrong, some divisions are the result of legitimate grievances against abuses of authority in the church, but at the same time, there are many other occasions where division was motivated by less noble means, resting upon the fault lines of preexisting social, political and cultural differences. Instead of celebrating this diversity and distinctiveness, some have used such blessings to drive people apart. History provides numerous examples of how Christians fail to be honest in disagreement or constructive in dialogue. One can only wonder how such conversations might have been different if we borrowed a page from Ephesians and instead devoted our time and energy toward the task of reconciliation – not rebuilding the same tired old barriers over and over again – but rediscovering the common humanity that we share.

History can be frustrating, but as the church, we recommit ourselves to this ideal every Sunday morning: We are one body. Division and discord may obscure our unity in Christ, but it can never overcome it. Unity in Christ must be aspirational as much as it is inspirational, because it means conforming ourselves to the truth: We are one in Christ. We remain one people under the one Lord. Triviality divides easily, but the consequences of disunity are profound: If we of a common faith cannot join together in worship and praise of a common Lord, then what is the purpose of the church? How else are we relevant? How can we expect races, classes, religions, neighbors, or family members (much less enemies) to reconcile with one another, if they have no example to follow?

As the church, we don't have to be what we once were. And we should certainly never pretend to be something we're not. We only have to be who the Lord is calling us to be. And the Lord requires us to be reconciled to one another just as we have become reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. *This is literally why we are here!* The task of reconciliation requires honesty, imagination, open-mindedness and perhaps most importantly (and perhaps most elusively), trust in one another. We must have the vision and discipline to recognize how we are bound together as recipients of a common grace. For no matter the question at hand – either in the church or the world – true and meaningful conversation can only begin among those who possess the humility and the wisdom to listen and learn.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.

Interlude

Hymn: *We are One in the Spirit*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMD6evRsrkA>

1. We are one in the Spirit We are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit We are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity May one day be restored

Refrain

And they'll know we are Christians By our love, By our love
Yes, they'll know we are Christians By our love

2. We will walk with each other We will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other We will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news That God is in our land
3. We will work with each other We will work side by side
We will work with each other We will work side by side
And we'll guard human dignity And save each human pride
4. All praise to the Father From whom all things come
And all praise to Christ Jesus His only son
And all praise to the Spirit Who makes us one

***Affirmation of Faith:** *The "Great Ends of the Church" [The Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order, F-1.0304]*

The great ends of the Church are:

**the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. Amen.**

Announcements

Offering

Offertory

Let whoever is of a generous heart bring an offering to the Lord as we continue to praise God through the sharing of our gifts.

**Doxology*

**Prayer of Dedication*

Gracious God, we give you thanks for this day and the works of your mighty hand. We give you thanks for your Son Jesus Christ, the one who sows the seeds of righteousness for our Father's sake. Bless these our humble gifts. Use them in your service and according to your good purpose, that you may be glorified in all that we say and do. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Prayers of the People & the Lord's Prayer

Gracious Lord, all praise and glory are due to you, so we give you thanks for this day where we may gather together as a new humanity and as fellow members of your body, to celebrate our hope and confidence in your steadfast love, by lifting our prayers to you. We praise you for the

hope of the resurrection and the promise of your kingdom. We praise you for your Spirit of wisdom and counsel. We pray that our eyes and our hearts may be opened to behold the boundless riches of your grace. We pray for the strength to follow Christ's example of humility and obedience, that your presence may be revealed through the many gifts of your disciples.

We pray for the blessings of Christian unity, that your church may act in the world as a sign of your grace and love. Bless all who proclaim the gospel through word and action. We pray for those who dedicate their gifts to the good of our community. We pray for those with special needs and the ones we entrust with their care. We pray for all who serve.

In you we remember all those in the world who are in need of your comfort and care. We pray that the hungry may be filled and the poor provided for. We pray that the homeless may be sheltered and grieving comforted. We pray for those in the world who are in need of justice, people who are oppressed or marginalized. We pray for those who live in the midst of violence, the addicted, the lonely and those who are without hope. Empower your body to not only see and hear, but also to act faithfully in your name.

Gracious Lord, lift us by the power of your Spirit and raise us all into new life with you. Amid a broken world, give us the voice to proclaim your rule to all who have the courage to hear your Word. Reassure us through times of uncertainty, trouble and doubt with knowledge of your victory, that from God's right hand you alone rule over creation in perfect justice and righteousness and call all people to love and serve you. Help us to come to find the fullness and completeness that only comes through faith in you.

We lift up these prayers to you, Almighty God, through your Son Jesus Christ, the One who is alive with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and who taught us to pray...

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.

Charge & Benediction

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer
and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.

And may the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and your minds
in knowledge and love of God,
and of God Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Remain with you always.

Alleluia! Amen!