

## September 12, 2021 – English Worship Service – 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

### Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you call your church to witness that in Christ we are reconciled to you. Help us so to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may turn to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.  
**Amen.**

### Hymn: *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*

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

1. I Sing The Mighty Power Of God  
That Made The Mountains Rise,  
That Spread The Flowing Seas Abroad  
And Built The Lofty Skies.  
We Sing The Wisdom That Ordained  
The Sun To Rule The Day;  
The Moon Shines Full At His Command,  
And All The Stars Obey.
2. I Sing The Goodness Of The Lord  
That Filled The Earth With Food;  
He Formed The Creatures With His Word  
And Then Pronounced Them Good.  
Lord, How Your Wonders Are Displayed,  
Where'er We Turn Our Eyes,  
If We Survey The Ground We Tread  
Or Gaze Upon The Skies.
3. There's Not A Plant Or Flower Below  
But Makes Your Glories Known,  
And Clouds Arise And Tempests Blow  
By Order From Your Throne;  
While All That Borrows Life From You  
Is Ever In Your Care,  
And Everywhere That We Can Be,  
You, God, Are Present There.

### Call to Worship [Adapted from Psalm 19]

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.  
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.  
The decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart.  
The commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes.  
The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

### First Scripture Lesson: James 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.<sup>2</sup>For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet

they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can saltwater yield fresh.

*Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.*

***People: Thanks be to God!***

### **Prayer of Confession (Unison)**

The proof of God's amazing love is this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us. Because we have faith in him, we dare to approach the Lord with confidence. In faith and penitence, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

**Gracious Lord, you teach that it is not what goes into a person, but what comes out which defiles. All good things come from you, yet we repay such gifts by showing contempt toward others. Rather than transform ourselves, we twist your Word to justify our pettiness. Forgive our hypocrisy, Lord. Cleanse us by your grace. Create within us hopeful and willing hearts to seek your favor in all that we do.**

### **Silent Prayer**

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

### **Assurance of Pardon**

Hear the good news! The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good. I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. **Amen.**

### **Prayer for Illumination**

Lord, by the power of your Spirit open our hearts and minds to receive your Word that we not forget the wonders you have done nor neglect to make them known to our children, nor fail to tell them to the world. Amen.

### **Second Scripture Reading: Mark 7:1-8, 14-23**

1 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 thoroughly 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 it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live 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.'

14 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.'

17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, <sup>19</sup>since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup>And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. <sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

**Hymn:** *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnqrcR43Fdg>

1. Breathe On Me, Breath Of God,  
Fill Me With Life Anew,  
That I May Love What Thou Dost Love,  
And Do What Thou Wouldst Do.
2. Breathe On Me, Breath Of God,  
Until My Heart Is Pure,  
Until My Will Is One With Thine,  
To Do And To Endure.
3. Breathe On Me, Breath Of God,  
'Till I Am Wholly Thine,  
Until This Earthly Part Of Me,  
Glows With Thy Fire Divine.
4. Breathe On Me, Breath Of God,  
So Shall I Never Die,  
But Live With Thee The Perfect Life  
Of Thine Eternity.

**Sermon:** *Letter of the Law*

Without a doubt, *The Gospel of Mark* is my favorite of the four gospels. It is an intense, revealing, and sometimes intimate exploration of discipleship and the person of Jesus Christ. The reader is often brought into situations which demand a response from Christ's followers. The question of "Who is Jesus Christ?" dominates the narrative, and we will not receive answer until we see Christ dying upon the cross. Until that moment, however, it seems that everyone has their own opinion regarding who Jesus is. Therefore, when someone approaches Jesus in Mark's gospel, one must wonder about their motivations. What are they looking for? Why do they seek the Christ? Suffice it to say, in this journey of life, what we are seeking reveals a lot about who we are!

As the seventh chapter opens in the Gospel of Mark, we see how Pharisees and scribes have "gathered around" Jesus as he teaches in Galilee. It is noted that some of them have come from as far as Jerusalem to see him, since Jesus' fame has traveled across the land in a short period of time. Mark identifies these people as those who have come to see Jesus, so once again we must wonder, "What are they searching for?" And it does not take long for the motives of the Pharisees to be revealed. They are waiting for Jesus to make a mistake. We have known since chapter three how the Pharisees have conspired with the Herodians to

“destroy” Jesus. Therefore, they come to Jesus searching for anything they can use to discredit him and have him arrested.

It turns out, it doesn't take them long to find something. They quickly notice how some of Jesus' disciples eat without washing their hands. Normally, we want to encourage people to wash their hands before eating, but keep in mind that this case has little to do with sanitation. The act of washing one's hands (as Mark notes) was one of many religious rituals that the ancient Jews observed. And they use it to publicly accuse Jesus, “*Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*” The Pharisees believe they have Jesus cornered with this clear violation of the law of Moses. Clearly, there is something wrong with what Jesus has been teaching his disciples!

Jesus quickly turns the tables on his critics saying, “*Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites. (It is actually you who) abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*” According to Jesus, the Pharisees violate the law by twisting the Word of God into something that it is NOT, that is to say, a litmus test to measure the moral failings of others. They cite chapter and verse of “the rules” to advance a narrow-minded agenda. Jesus makes it clear that such self-righteous nonsense defiles the Word of God and the purposes for which God has sent it, just as their words and their actions attempt to defile Christ – the divine Word incarnate – himself!

Readers should be careful not to take matters to the other extreme by assuming that Jesus is telling his disciples to reject religious tradition altogether. Even Jesus understood the value of religious observance and ritual, as he was a devout Jew. Fault is found with the Pharisees, not with the law. But Jesus' words force the reader to consider the question: What is the purpose of the law? Why has God provided us scripture to begin with? As readers, when we encounter the Lord in the pages of the bible, what are we seeking? Are we seeking to advance our personal interests? Or are we using the Word as God as it was intended, to glorify God and to fulfill God's will? After all, our motives matter. The reasons *why* we do something are often more important than what we are trying to accomplish.

You will hear me say this again and again: *There is no greater heresy than to use the gift of holy scripture to win an argument.* Yet we see it all the time. A controversy erupts in the church over a specific issue and people run quickly to the pages of scripture. This side will pick this verse and this verse and this verse to support their argument, and the other side will pick that verse and that verse and that verse to support theirs, and they will use the words to bicker and fight and accuse and defend. The complete witness of scripture is neglected, the historical circumstances which gave rise to the words are forgotten, the social and religious context is ignored, so people can have the luxury of saying, “I told you so!” And in the end, this accomplishes little, other than to wear away at the fabric of our Christian unity.

And when people see such conflicts in the Christian community, they are put off by religion. The contrast between what we claim to believe and how we treat one another serves as the best evidence of our hypocrisy. Thus, people come to see the church as an irrelevant institution because of the way we frequently use our sacred texts to force the square peg of religious “tradition” through the round hole of modern social issues. And guess what? *They are right!* Either we are God's reconciling community, or we are not. Either we are Christ's disciples, or we are not. If it is not obvious to *everyone*, we can only blame ourselves.

So, we must ask: To what tradition do we belong? Is it one of petty moral judgment, or is it one of grace and love? Is it one of exclusivity and scrutiny, or is it one of inclusivity and acceptance? Is it one of insisting that we are right all the time, or is it possessing the humility to listen and to learn? Do the traditions of the past hold us prisoner, or do they set us free to worship and serve our Lord?

God wants us to be God's people now! God wants us to be God's servants now! God needs us to accept the challenge of discipleship to confront the injustices of our day and age. Scripture can guide us in such matters. For if we see where the Holy Spirit was at work in the past, then perhaps we will be able to see more clearly where the Spirit is working in the present. But if we reduce the gift of scripture to a simple set of "Thou shalt nots..." then we have truly missed the point. Scripture is a story of unmerited love and unconditional grace. When people use scripture to serve our own ends by alienating others, we forget the purposes for which it was given. By doing so, our broken nature only becomes magnified, rather than disguised.

*"Listen to me, all of you, and understand,"* Jesus declares to the crowd, speaking to disciple and Pharisee alike. *"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."* Whereas the Pharisees are quick to regurgitate moral judgments upon others, Jesus has no need to do so. The power of his grace and his love are evident. Regardless of how faithful we consider ourselves, relative to the Lord's greatness, we all fall woefully short. Even though people are so different from one another, we each spend so much time and energy trying to justify our personal beliefs and opinions. Yet the only thing that we share in common is the fact that, under the letter of the law, we all stand convicted! Ironically, this is where we discover our unity – not in our virtue, but in our guilt.

Therefore, should you spend your time constantly searching for fault in others, then guess what? You won't have to look too hard. You will soon find all that you seek. But be warned! The things for which you search may end up revealing much more about you than those you scrutinize. The Gospel of Mark asks: What are *you* looking for when you approach Jesus? If you will notice, those self-proclaimed, "morally upright, decent and religious" folk who seek to justify themselves before the Savior – they never fare so well. The most faithful examples in scripture are physically, mentally or spiritually broken people who come before Jesus seeking healing, wholeness and forgiveness, because they *know* that only Jesus can provide such things.

If we truly consider ourselves to be a faithful people, then we must count ourselves among them. We must acknowledge our own need for Christ's help and guidance. Fortunately, Jesus routinely demonstrates how, despite our many faults, we have each been welcomed into this tradition of grace and love. If we can set aside the folly of moral judgment, we might be able to create enough room in our hearts so that God can fill us with good things!

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

## Interlude

**Hymn:** In Christ There Is No East or West

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEwLle8Ue4Y>

1. In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.
2. In Christ shall true hearts everywhere  
their high communion find.  
His service is the golden cord  
close binding humankind.
3. Join hands, then, people of the faith,  
whate'er your race may be.

All children of the living God  
are surely kin to me.

4. In Christ now meet both east and west,  
in him meet south and north.  
All Christly souls are joined as one  
throughout the whole wide earth.

**\*Affirmation of Faith: *The Apostles' Creed***

**I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; the Forgiveness of sins; the Resurrection of the body, and the Life everlasting. Amen.**

**Announcements**

**Offering**

*Offertory*

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God the Father. Inspired by God's generosity, let us return gifts of gladness and thanksgiving through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*\*Doxology*

*\*Prayer of Dedication*

Gracious God, you have cleared the pathways of righteousness before us that we may be free to follow in your way. Accept these humble offerings in gratitude for all that you have accomplished for us for our sake, and allow them to serve as symbols of our complete dedication to you. In Christ's name we pray. **Amen.**

**Prayers of the People & the Lord's Prayer**

Gracious Lord, we once again pause amid the noise of our busy lives to lift our voices in praise to you. We thank you for that love that bears all things, hopes all things and believes all things for our sake. In remembering your love and grace, we hope that it instills within us humility and reverence, that we may feel ourselves moved to accomplish your will, by acting in justice and righteousness toward our neighbor, and devoting ourselves more completely to the cause of reconciliation.

In the spirit of these words, we pray to you Lord that we may be healed of our deafness and open our ears to the world around us. Give us voice to declare the wonders of your steadfast love. Empower your servants so that the hungry may be fed, the homeless sheltered and the poor provided for. Lend your healing and comforting presence to those who are sick, those who suffer in mind, body or spirit, and those who grieve. We pray that you hold in your care the lonely, the addicted and those with special needs. Give strength to all who proclaim the gospel. Grant wisdom and understanding to those who lead. Bless those who serve. Uplift those who struggle against oppression and protect those who live amid violence. Help us to remember with fondness all who have come before us in the faith, that we might be inspired by their example.

No matter if we live in joy or sorrow, give us strength to pray in your name. In times of faith and in times of doubt, encourage us to reorient our lives so that our priorities become your priorities, that the things we desire become the things that your desire. Help us to recognize

the connection that we all share as your people, and that when we look after the needs of others, we also look after our own needs as well. Remind us of what we already know, and what you have already declared – that all good things in this world come from you and how the perseverance, strength and encouragement found in your steadfast love will always see us through times of uncertainty or trial.

We lift these prayers to you gracious Lord, in the words taught to us by your Son, saying:

**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**

As God's own, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness and patience, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, and crown all these things with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Alleluia! Amen!**