



Sunday Worship

September 13, 2020

*Draw near to God for
God is waiting for you.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come! Come praise the eternal God!

Let all that is within us—body, emotions, mind, and will—praise God’s holy name!

Despite our failures, God forgives and releases us. More than any doctor, God heals our diseases. When we are famished and weak, God fills us with good and beautiful things, satisfying our needs, and restoring our strength.

So come! Come, praise the eternal God! Sing songs from a grateful heart, and remember all that God has done for us.

OPENING PRAYER

We sing and speak your praise, O God, grateful for the many ways in which you have healed us. Keep our hearts, our minds, and our spirits open to learn ways in which we can offer healing love for others. For we ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

HYMN #620 Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven

1. Praise my soul, the King of heaven;
to his feet your tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
evermore his praises sing:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise the everlasting King.

2. Praise him for his grace and favor
to his people in distress;
praise him still the same as ever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Glorious in his faithfulness.

3. Father-like, he tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands he gently bears us,
rescues us from all our foes.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Widely yet his mercy flows.

4. Angels, help us to adore him;
you behold him face to face.
Sun and moon, bow down before him,
dwellers all in time and space:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace.

CALL TO CONFESSION

Alleluia, praise the God of grace. We count on that grace. But what if God paid us back in full for all the wrong we have done?

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS

O Lord we seek your mercy yet we ourselves look for payback when we are wronged. We think it “only fair” and “what is right” when we retaliate and use harsh words and withdraw from relationship. The forgiveness you offer on our account is larger than we can comprehend, still we withhold forgiveness and

carry the grudge over petty items. We are eager to do your judging. And the worst: we conspire our inner thoughts to secure your forgiveness while avoiding honest repentance.

Forgive us Lord for the sins we know in our hearts. Save us Lord from the sins we hide.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and has not dealt with us according to our sins. Instead, God has chosen the sacrifice of God's own son on our account. It is because Jesus Christ pays the last full measure that our sins are forgiven. This gift of forgiveness makes us able, with the power of Holy Spirit, to choose to forgive, renew and live again in right relationship with each other and with our God. So remember the waters of your baptism and that **Jesus died for me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me. Amen.**

GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

GOSPEL LESSON Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and

pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

SERMON

Think back to the summers of your childhood. Summer has usually been a time to get outside, go places, and get together with friends. This is especially true for school age children as they count down the days until the end of the academic year when they can freely play without the restrictions of classroom walls, rigorous lessons and homework. No longer do they need to merely gaze out the window longing for recess and the final bell. Summer means restrictions removed and play begins with the rising of the sun. Except this year there were restrictions. Tough restrictions so that there was little to do with few options of places to go especially because most parents continued to labor at their jobs. At least that’s the way it was for my grandchildren. They found themselves getting much more screen time than they had ever had been permitted before. The combination of getting less exercise, having only their annoying siblings as playmates and parents needing peace and quiet to complete their employment demands, resulted in more than a little tension at home.

I desperately wanted to help make it better for both children and adults. It is my good fortune to live in a place with kind and generous landlords who allow me the use of their pool, for which both I and my family are eternally grateful. Going to the pool was often our place of respite. I’d round up the grandkids and give them hours of playtime jumping, splashing and using their imagination in that cement pond. All would be well until someone splashed another who didn’t want to be splashed or someone cut in line at the diving board, or an idea for a game didn’t meet with enthusiastic buy-in. Tempers would flare. The result, someone would get splashed or shoved or have toys grabbed or called a “jerk” (or worse, but “jerk” does seem to be a favorite derogatory term). I was always amazed at what was seemingly insignificant yet could elicit such outbursts of anger. But it did and would then move on to REVENGE! The offended always responded by both getting mad *and* getting even! It was then time for me to exercise my adult responsibility to try to put an end to skirmish. Now my grandchildren have been taught that when you offend another you are then to apologize so that all may be forgiven and forgotten. Even as they said those three magic words, “I’m sorry” was spoken reluctantly through clenched teeth with malice not yet having left their hearts.

Forgiveness often does not come easily. Offenses for which we need forgiveness do. This is not just true for children, it is certainly true for adults as well, maybe even more than children which comes out in today’s gospel lesson.

Jesus has just spoken to his disciples about how church members are to deal with offenses committed toward them by speaking to the offender privately in order to bring about reconciliation. Peter, ever the inquisitive one, asks about limits, probably hoping for an out to the forgiveness business. He thought seven was a pretty high number, in fact it’s the perfect number – seven days for creation and all was complete. Forgiving seven times and the forgiveness is complete. The Old Testament prophet Amos says that God will forgive the Israelites three times, so Peter is offering two times that number plus one more. That’s a lot.

In the parable told by Jesus, the servant thought the 100 denarii was a pretty high number. That doesn’t mean anything in comparison to the 10,000 talents—the allegorical image Jesus uses to illustrate the magnitude of everything we owe to God. We squabble over matters we think are huge, like my grandchildren at the pool, but in the context of God they are really not so big. We scream at the young worker in the McDonald’s drive-thru who messed up our order and demand a refund. We don’t allow our child to go to a party for sneaking a piece of candy. We refuse to speak to someone because of a petty squabble from years back. Meanwhile, we have the nerve to ask Jesus, “How many times should we forgive? What are we supposed to do?” We don’t get it. We never have.

Jesus tells the disciple Peter that forgiveness in the kingdom of God must be generous beyond limits. We shouldn't forgive our offenders a mere seven times, but rather, seventy-seven, or seventy *times* seven. In other words, forgiveness should be our regular practice, our way of life, our default mode. Why? Because we are first and foremost a forgiven people — a people generously and lavishly forgiven by God.

Scott Hoezee makes the point that “Forgiven” is who and what we just *are*. Forgiveness is not a tool you need just once in a while. Forgiveness is not like that Phillips screwdriver that you keep out in the garage and that you fetch now and then when a kitchen cabinet is loose (and when a regular flat-head screwdriver won't work). Forgiveness is not a specialty tool to be utilized occasionally.

Forgiveness is more like the clothes on your back. You don't generally walk around the house naked and you surely never leave the house without some kind of attire covering you. Forgiveness is more like that: it goes with you, accompanies you, and is needed by you everywhere you go.

So what does this imply? For one thing it implies that each and every one of us needs to *be* forgiven by God, and by others, every day. We need to *be* forgiven about as often, if not more often, as we need to eat. True, most days we are not guilty of anything huge. Most days we are not carrying around with us the burden of having committed adultery, of having embezzled money from our company, or of having been convicted of drunk driving. But there are always a slew of smaller sins, lapses, and faults. There are always those dark thoughts we're glad no one else can see. There are also those offences we aren't even aware that we commit like buying clothes made by children violating our child labor laws, or responding with fear, anxiousness when encountering a person who your snap judgment deems “different” or inferior.

Seeing forgiveness as every much a daily matter as eating and drinking puts each of us into perspective. In light of the abundant grace in which we stand, what possible response can we have, but to pay the wealth of God's forgiveness forward? Someone once said that the most significant word in the Bible is the *as*. Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.

Jesus's teaching in the parable of the unforgiving servant has an implied *as* within it. *As* the servant is forgiven, so also is he to forgive. *As* can be powerful and life-giving. We can find the possibility of new life both when we are forgiven and when we can let go. Harboring resentment and anger hurts the one holding on to it more than the one who has committed the offense.

When some of my grandchildren get mad and feel offended by their cousin or sibling, they often respond by completely withdrawing as if this will hurt the offender when in truth, it only hurts themselves.

But as important as forgiveness is, Debie Thomas makes the point in her article “Unpacking Forgiveness” in the webzine *Journey with Jesus* that given the context we find ourselves in right now, it feels essential to begin in a different place. To get at this forgiveness stuff, we need to stress what forgiveness is *not*.

First, she says, “Forgiveness is not denial.” Forgiveness isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt, or that Christianity requires us to forget past harms and “let bygones be bygones.” Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn't grieved and angered by injustice.

On the contrary, the starting line of forgiveness is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Of harm. Of real and profound violation. Whenever we talk about the need for forgiveness, we must begin by recognizing and naming the extent of the brokenness. Why? Because we were created for good. We were created for love, equality, tenderness, and wholeness. As image-bearers of God, we were made for a just and nurturing world that honors our dignity. When we experience any deviation from that basic goodness, it is appropriate — it is human and healthy *and Christian* — to react with horror.

That leads to Debie Thomas' second point, forgiveness is not a detour or a shortcut. The same Bible that calls us to forgive also calls us to mourn, to lament, to speak truth to power, and to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us, we must never allow

forgiveness to degenerate into "cheap grace." That is, "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Communion without confession... grace without the Cross."

If you feel that any form of anger needs to be squelched, then consider that *righteous* anger is *very much* what Jesus did. Remember him cleansing the temple with a whip? Remember him blasting the religious hypocrites of his day for oppressing the poor? Remember him rebuking his disciples for blocking vulnerable children from his presence? Yes, Jesus forgave. But he also raged. He also resisted all violations of sanctuary. He also called out anyone who blocked access to his Father's house. He also denounced the mistreatment of the most vulnerable and beleaguered people in his society.

In other words, there is a time to get angry and stay angry. A time to insist on change. A time to say, "Enough is enough." Yes, we are called to practice and preach forgiveness. But I believe it is also the task of the Church to take sin as seriously as Jesus did — with impassioned and sustained cries for justice.

Finally, Thomas would say, forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even after we've forgiven them. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end; it's a beginning. An orientation. A leaning into the future which is not quick and easy.

Okay. If forgiveness is not denial, or a shortcut, or a reconciliation, or an easy process, then what is it? What exactly is Jesus asking of us when he tells us to forgive each other again and again and again and again?

In her popular memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Nora Gallagher writes, "Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past." Henri Nouwen writes, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

If these writers are correct, then I think forgiveness is choosing to lead with love instead of resentment. When we are consumed with our own pain, if we insist on turning to violence in one form or another of our well-deserved anger in every interaction we have with people who hurt us, then we are drinking poison, and the poison will kill us long before it does anything to our abusers. Thomas said, "to choose forgiveness is to release oneself from the tyranny of our bitterness. To trust that frenzied longing for vindication and justice is known to God. Cast hunger for healing deep into Christ's heart, because healing belongs to him, and he's the only one powerful enough to secure it."

Forgiveness is a transformed way of seeing. A way of seeing that is forward-focused. Future-focused. I don't believe that abuse and oppression are *ever* God's will or plan for anyone. But I do believe that God is always and everywhere in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us, and going to work on them for the purposes of multiplying wholeness and blessing. Because God is in the story, we can rest assured that our wounds will not end in loss, trauma, brokenness, and defeat. There will be another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's abundance.

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber, after describing mistreatment as a chain that binds us, writes stunningly about the power of forgiveness to free us for the work of justice and transformation. These are her words:

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to

Speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for."
Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and merciful God, we come before you this day, fresh from a week in which we have been challenged. Some of the challenges have caused us worry and strife; other challenges bring to us clear directions for our lives. In all of this, you are with us bringing healing and peace for our lives. We offer to you names of those who are ill, who mourn, who feel lost and alienated, wondering if anyone cares about them. (offer your own prayers). Hear our prayers, O Lord. Bring your healing mercies to all these people we have named with our hearts and our voices.

We also bring to you, loving God, names and situations of great joy and celebration, for you have been in our midst during these times as well as during the difficult times. (offer your own prayers here) Hear our praises, O God. Bring your loving presence to all these people we have named with our hearts and our voices. For it is in confidence of your abiding love and mercy that we offer this prayer and offer the prayer that Jesus taught: 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.

HYMN #435 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

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.

BENEDICTION

Have hope because God will always be with you;

No matter which way you are going.

At school, at work, at home, at play, God is with you.

Night and day, when you connect with friends, and when you are alone, God is with you.

When you are afraid, have faith, because God is with you.

Now, go from this place and remember that God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — is with you and cares for you now and always. Amen.