

Worship for August 27, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship

Joshua 24:15

Choose this day whom you will serve.

**As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**

\*Hymn 321 The Church's One Foundation

Gathering Prayer

**O, Lord, our God,**

**wellspring of all that is,**

**you are the sea on which we float,**

**the wind that fills our sails,**

**the storm that buffets,**

**the calm that brings us peace.**

**Open our ears to hear your word,**

**our eyes to see your beauty,**

**our hearts to be warmed by your love.**

**Free us from the bonds of sin and selfishness,**

**and make us over to be bearers of your joy and peace. Amen.**

Hymn Take, O Take Me As I Am

First Reading Exodus 1:8-2:10

Time With Our Young Disciples

Second Reading Matthew 16:13-20

Morning Message

It's that time of year again...driving along fifth or sixth Avenues in downtown Huntington and you see college students and their parents or whoever they could recruit to help them, dragging boxes, trunks, laundry baskets, guitars, and more into the dorms and apartments that line the streets. It's a hard job. Some of you have experience in it. I'd love to move closer to our family in North Carolina, but, all I have to do is take one look in the garage...and I am over that notion.

Rev. Janet Hunt is a Lutheran pastor in the Midwest. She writes that she was moving into a new home. Her mother had come to help pack, move, unpack and settle into her new place.

They had been at it all day and were growing very tired. After several hours work, Janet's mother headed to the bathroom. Janet sat down in a favorite comfortable chair and promptly fell asleep. She says she doesn't know how long she was out, but when she awoke to the sound of knocking and her mother calling her name.

She jumped up, and headed upstairs to the bathroom where her mother was trapped behind a locked door. She had been trying for several minutes, but the knob would not turn. Janet tried it from her side and still it wouldn't budge.

So, Janet found some tools and proceeded to take the doorknob off. But since it was still attached on the other side, that , too, failed.

Janet briefly thought about calling for help, but, she didn't know her neighbors yet. She thought about calling the fire department, but, that seemed a little extreme.

So, she resorted to drastic measures: she traded her screwdriver for a hammer and proceeded to pound away at the lock. After a few minutes of this pursuit, her mother tried the handle again and it gave way and the door swung open. Free at last.

You been there. You've been locked in or out or a key was misplaced. One of my family members was starting their car one day and the key broke off in the ignition. When Ed and I bought our first house, we went to the closing and when all the papers had been signed, the realtor handed us the keys while suppressing a laugh...the house we bought had four doors. Front, back, side and garage. We were handed four keys...one regular-looking door key...and three skeleton keys. No kidding.

Maybe we haven't been trapped behind a locked door or had to resort to anything as drastic and destructive as what Janet did, but I think it's safe to say we have all come up against something we couldn't easily get through or around and we do whatever we can with the resources we have.

In our text, Jesus speaks not only to Peter, but, we believe, to us in our time, not of doors necessarily, but of keys-keys which we understand hold a promise to open up, to reveal, that which is locked. These keys can make way for us to enter a place, or to understand mysteries that have up to now been unavailable to us. Keys to freedom and hope for these are the keys to the Kingdom of God. And Jesus tied these keys to something he has come to teach us...these keys are tied to forgiveness, grace. We receive God grace, thanks be to God. But, grace does not, or should not stop with us. In gratitude for grace given, we can do none other than extend it ourselves.

Forgiveness or the lack of it carries eternal consequences. You know this. WE all bear scars. We are all acquainted with sin, in its many forms. Maybe we are mistreated, or someone we love has been hurt. Maybe justice, as we understand it, was not served following some wrong done. Maybe life has treated us unfairly and you want to blame someone. Sometimes the wound is so

great, so confounding and complex, we have to blame someone and God is the most obvious culprit.

One of the most compelling accounts of forgiveness I am aware of is that of the community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. You remember the story: This is an Amish community. A local man, who bore a grudge against God, entered the one room schoolhouse one morning, where he assaulted and killed many of the students.

Can we even imagine the depth of that pain? Innocent children lost their lives for no reason. The children of peaceful people of faith. How would they go on?

Well, they went on by gathering together, expressing their grief, remembering their precious children. And then they did something truly remarkable: church elders visited in the home of the man who had committed this atrocious act, meeting with his widow, for he had taken his own life after taking the lives of the children. They expressed their concern for his family, his wife and little children.

They made the decision to forgive, to extend the grace of God, to the one who had taken so much from them. Their faith demanded it.

There was a movie made of this incident. At the end, viewers see the community gathered at the graves of the Amish children. And then we see the lonely image of the shooter's widow, babe in arms, sobbing at her husband's grave. And then the camera is trained on a remarkable sight: men, women, and children in that signature black and blue garb of the Amish, coming to bear witness to this young mother's grief and pain.

Grief and pain are emotions with which we are all familiar.

A year or so ago, there was a terrible incident near our home. Law enforcement officers were attempting to serve a warrant on a resident and the whole thing went wrong. The one who had presumably committed a crime was shot and killed. There was a great deal of reporting that all came off with a "he got what he deserved" flavor.

I happened to run into someone who lives right across the street from where the incident occurred. She was horrible shaken. With a trembling voice, she said something like "Everyone is focused on the crimes he committed. We'll never really know the truth of that because of the way it ended. But we do know this: last night, a mother lost her son."

That level of empathy can lead to real transformation. Bearing witness to one another's grief and pain. And so can sharing in one another's blessings. A good example of that was yesterday's dinner at the Senior Center. I think I was there about two hours. I know some of you were there much longer than that.

Coming home, I was reflecting on our time together and I was thinking about what was unlocked in order to make that happen once a month. I realized I had not heard or witnessed anything in that brief time but good will, fellowship, community. It was a spiritual experience. I was looking for something to compare it to. Communion in noodles and sauce? Well, maybe, I do believe there is something sacred in every meal. Even if we set a place for one, we are always in the presence of the unseen guest.

I think it was more like a foot washing. Grace lavished upon one another. And grace is underrated.

\* Hymn Long Ago When Pharaoh's Daughter Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

\*Affirmation of Faith A Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA, 1991

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,**

**everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,**

**sets us free to love God and neighbor,**

**binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

**The same Spirit, who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.**

**In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**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!"**

\*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

\*Hymn 607 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

**Almighty God, from whom all blessings flow, may you find us ever-thankful for the abundance of your gifts. Accept these offerings as signs of our thanks and praise. May they serve to strengthen our commitment to know, love, and serve you this and every day. Amen.**

\*Hymn 462 I Love to Tell the Story

\*Blessing

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,  
now and always. Amen.

\*Postlude