

Worship for September 10, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship Psalm 46:1-3, 7

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.

Therefore, we shall not fear, though the earth gives way,

though the mountains be hurled into the sea,

though the waters rage and foam,

though the mountains tremble at the tumult.

Lord God of hosts, be with us still.

*Hymn 318 In Christ There Is No East or West, verses 1 and 2

Prayer of Confession

God of strength,

your Son, Jesus, told us that in this world we will endure tribulation.

If we should suffer for righteousness sake,

save us from self-righteousness.

Give us grace to pray for our enemies,

and to forgive, even as you have forgiven us.

Through Jesus Christ, who was crucified, but is risen. Amen.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me;

for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.”

In the name of our gracious Savior, our sins are forgiven.

Be at peace and pray for the peace of the world.

First Reading Genesis 50: 15-21

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 18:21-35

Morning Message

I'm no math wiz. I was so good at Algebra that I took it twice. But, even with my limitations, I can figure out that seventy times seven is a lot. "Jesus math" says that when a brother or sister sins against us, we are to forgive the offense. Not once. Not twice, but seventy-seven times. Whoa. Like I said, that's a lot of times.

In our text today, Jesus is asked how many times we should forgive and he launches into this parable about the ungrateful servant. Now, I confess to you that I had a hard time getting past the words "slave" and "servant." We have an enlightened understanding of how powerful those terms can be. Racial tension has risen in recent years. We find ourselves in a turbulent time, marked by school-involved violence, unending political conflict, economic concerns. In our own state, the two flagship universities are struggling to address and respond to the tremendous changes in the state and nation. The extreme weather conditions we are witnessing has wrought suffering, for some, over and over. So much of our food comes from geographic areas that have been hard hit by either flood or drought or wildfire. Record heat has hit northern California. Have you ever been to San Fransisco? I think you can experience all four seasons in one day there, but they all end with sweaters or jackets, no matter the time of year. Until recently.

Sometimes it seems the whole world is filled with dis-equilibrium and angst and uncertainty.

The point Jesus made was that God has witnessed our lives- the good, the bad, and the ugly. But life is not consumed by suffering and hardship. God has lavished mercy upon us, so that we might experience true liberty-freedom from sin. But, he warns us, if we seek forgiveness, then turn around and exact revenge on the next person who wrongs us, we have evidently not turned from sin, and renounced its power over us, or turned toward God at all.

Have you ever thought about what the word "lavish" means? It comes from the verb, to lave, to wash. When I think of God lavishing love and grace on us, I imagine standing beneath a great waterfall with fresh, cool, sparkling water coursing over my head, my shoulders, flowing over me all the way down to my toes, sinking into the rich, fertile earth.

Picture yourself standing under that waterfall. After a run or after mowing the lawn. You're hot and sweaty. Thirsty. You stand under the cascading water. How does that make you feel? Clean? Light? Joyful? Refreshed? Free of all baggage? Baggage we can call "sin."

Good. That's how we should feel. Thanks be to God.

And then disaster occurs. Or we are reminded of something catastrophic. The anniversary of 9/11 rolls around as it does today. And all those heavy emotions return, most notably grief and anger. What do we do with that? Those feelings are real. They are legitimate.

Let us acknowledge, there are consequences to sin. And the consequences from that fateful day have changed all our lives. Remember the color-coded threat levels? The first time I heard that announced in an airport, while awaiting a flight, I was so filled with fear I was sick.

Soon after these changes took place, we took a trip to California. Those announcements were made repeatedly, increasing my anxiety, and I'm sure other travelers' too.. Passing thru security is always a hassle. And then when we did finally board, the passenger to my right was a dark-skinned man with a backpack. There we sat. Shoulder-to-shoulder from San Francisco to Columbus, Ohio. I could feel my heart rate increase. I had some shortness of breath. My body was reacting to a perceived or imagined threat.

I've come to believe fear and anger are fraternal twins. Different... but they are born from the same womb. Sometimes, you can get them confused.

Do you think my seat assignment was an accident? I don't. There have been many times since that I've looked back on that long night in the air, when my fears and anger confronted me. I tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. So, I prayed. I prayed that the man next to me wasn't a terrorist planning to hijack the plane. I begged for God's protection, for a sense of God's presence and power and peace.

God did comfort me in those hours. We landed without incident and went our separate ways. All was well. But, was it?

If we applied this parable to the situation, might Jesus have said to me, "You prayed for my protection, my presence, my love. And, you have those things always. What were your prayers for your brother sitting next to you? Is he not worthy of my love and mercy, too?"

When Jesus spoke to the crowd about forgiveness, he wasn't necessarily talking about those little things that may get under our skin but won't ruin our lives. Like, when the garbage collectors don't show up on their scheduled day, or when your Happy Meal comes without the toy, or the newspaper arrives all soggy. We can let those things go.

But, what about those things we can't let go? We are all subject to things about which we may have little or no agency. But, we can decide how we will respond. How have we responded to the changes that Covid has brought our way? Remember back in 2020, we looked for the color-coded maps that tracked the number of cases? Remember the daily announcements of Covid-related hospitalizations and deaths? Even now, are you hoping to receive the latest booster shot that addresses the latest Omicron variant soon? I am. Primarily because my brother and his wife are very sick right now with Covid. My brother texted me a few days ago saying, he had been

run over by a truck, hit by a car, and thrown twice by the same horse. And he would rather suffer any of them again over Covid.

We've faced national crises before. We've pulled together. Remember when the members of congress stood on the Capitol steps on September 11, 2001 and sang "God Bless America?" Friends, I don't want to witness another catastrophic event but it sure would be reassuring to see a display of our national leaders rallying around the country lifting up our common bond, our shared hopes and dreams.

Each year, when that fateful day rolls around, we pause and remember. We light candles, sing patriotic songs, set up art installations like The Healing Fields at Spring Hill Cemetery. We remember lives lost and heroic acts.

Speaking for myself, while I still grieve, the sharp anger and paralyzing fear have diminished over the years. And that is important because the country has to move forward, addressing opportunities and challenges as they come. And they will.

Lots of us like to travel. I can't wait to take our grandchildren to some of our favorite places. But, I don't want to panic every time I board a plane or go to a large crowded event. Our granddaughter goes to preschool at the Jewish Temple in Winston-Salem. You know the tragedies that have occurred in Jewish communities of faith in recent years, so you can imagine the concerns we have for her and her school.

So, it's important to face my fears and prejudices, to make the effort to forgive those who have attacked innocent people. I confess, I find it impossible some days to find forgiveness. God is still working on me. Maybe you're ahead of me and God is helping you cultivate a spirit of forgiveness. Maybe I should follow your example.

Our nation and our neighborhoods are becoming more and more diverse. You may be tired of hearing it, but, so much of the violence we witness seems to be sparked by hatred. If we want peace, then it's absolutely essential that we learn to respect and appreciate the differences in race, culture, religion, orientation and other human conditions.

One of my favorite quotes made by Queen Elizabeth is this: "Peace is the hardest form of leadership."

The Washington National Cathedral is a beacon of peace for many. Since the pandemic began, the cathedral leadership has recorded and broadcast the brief services of Morning Prayer. I commend them. They were a source of solace and peace for me while the pandemic raged on.

At the end of one service, there were photos of the beautiful stained glass windows that adorn that awesome place.

One of the windows featured that morning was the Space Window, which is really named the Science and Technology Window. I've stood beneath it a few times and it is breathtaking. Created by Rodney Winslow, the technique used to design and make that window is much different from the other gothic-styled windows in the cathedral. Winslow worked on it for twelve years, tearing up one design plan after another until he was satisfied.

NASA and a number of astronauts consulted on the project. The colors used in the window are especially intense. It is said that every astronaut reports that the colors they see from space are indescribable, otherworldly, like nothing they have ever seen. Crayola doesn't make a shade or hue that captures the beauty seen from high above the earth.

At the center of the window, the focal point, is a white circle. It is very thin and translucent. It is a piece of the moon, over three billion years old, picked up by Neil Armstrong on the Apollo 11 flight in 1969, at the first moon landing. It represents humankind's greatest achievement to date.

Artists like their works to speak for themselves, allowing the viewer to interact with the piece and drawing his or her own meanings from it. When I see that window, I think of all the men and women whose lives have been dedicated to the space program, and to the discipline and discovery of science, their sense of courage and adventure, how they inspired the next generation of exploration. It is set in this massive cathedral, the "house of prayer for all people," and, to me, serves as a sign that God is eternally calling us into God's creative plan as it unfolds from age to age.

And that is what I want to leave you with today. We are in difficult times. But we are not alone. God has not orphaned us and never will.

We have survived but we are cautious. I still carry masks and wear them. As the Brits would say, we "keep calm and carry on." We are the people who, with God's help, applied our intelligence, imagination, ingenuity, and grit to land a man on the moon and NASA says we will do it again. A woman may land the next spacecraft.

And with God's help, we will land 2023.

* Hymn 378 We Wait the Peaceful Kingdom

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p, 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting our Tithes and Offerings including offerings for Sunflower Seeds

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

Blessed are you, O God, maker and giver of all gifts.

**Use us and what we have gathered to bless the world with your love and grace,
through the One who gave his life for us. Amen.**

*Hymn 318 In Christ There Is No East or West, verses 3 and 4

*Blessing Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

**For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.**

*Postlude