

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*11th Sunday after Pentecost
10:30 a.m.
16 August 2020*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob;

P: whose hope is the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy Lord, you have called us to be members of one body, in the Church of your Son Jesus Christ. Join us now with those who, in all times and places, have praised your name; that, with one heart and mind, we may show forth the unity of your Church, in the power of your Holy Spirit, to whom, with the Father and the Son, we offer glory and praise, now and forever.

Merciful God, always perceiving, never deceiving, your word is living and active, able to judge the intentions of our hearts. We confess our confusion, sorrow and sin. You see our blindness to things that matter; our obsession with things that don't, and our indifference to a world wider than our small, limited vision. Forgive what we have been, enlarge our vision, and help us become what you will us to be.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, you have broken the tyranny of sin and sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts. Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service, that all people may know the glorious liberty of the children of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "God is our light and our salvation." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Lord, in the speaking of your Word, tell us what we need to hear, and teach us how to forgive and live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 133 (*The blessedness of unity*)

How very good and pleasant it is
 when kindred live together in unity!
 It is like the precious oil on the head,
 running down upon the beard,
 on the beard of Aaron,
 running down over the collar of his robes.
 It is like the dew of Hermon,
 which falls on the mountains of Zion.
 For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
 life for evermore.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
 as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

Genesis 45: 1-15 (*Joseph reveals himself to his brothers*)

Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.'

And they came closer.

He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent

me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

‘So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

‘Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.”

‘And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.

‘You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’

Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Genesis 45:5 *“God sent me before you to preserve life.”*

Joseph’s story is a collision of intersecting plots, like a traffic accident at a four-way stop. His brothers plot against him. Later, he plots against them. At different points in the story each thinks they have the ‘right of way’, that *they’re* in control, and only *they* know what it all means. Until Joseph realises that, no, they don’t. Another, larger plot has been in charge all along.

When we first meet him, Joseph sports the ‘coat of many colours’. “Look at me!” he brags to his brothers. “One day you’ll bow before me like servants before a king.”

But this arrogance is too much. The brothers hatch a plot to kill him. They dig a pit, tear his coat off, and throw him in. But, when the dreadful moment comes, they relent. Rather than kill him, they sell him to slave-traders heading for Egypt. They cry ‘crocodile tears’ in front of their father, who cries real ones. “That’s the end of Joseph,” they think.

But no. Years pass. Egypt’s Pharaoh learns that Joseph can explain dreams and forecast the future. Joseph soars to power and becomes viceroy to Pharaoh himself.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, famine grips the land. So, the brothers travel cap-in-hand to Egypt, where Joseph has wisely set aside stockpiles of food. They bow to him, just as Joseph had long ago foreseen.

Joseph recognises them, but they don't recognise him. They think he's long dead. But we overhear Joseph's inner turmoil. On the one hand, he wants revenge. But another part of his soul wants reconciliation. That part of him 'wins' in the tender scene we heard today.

"I'm your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt," he says.

Their jaws drop.

"Is my father still alive?" he asks. And then this: "Don't be distressed for selling me into slavery. For God sent me to preserve life."

Then they weep and embrace. And so, for the first time in many, many pages, *God* is mentioned. Not once, but three times.

Suddenly, it's clear that another plot has been at work all along. *God* has been involved; not as a force competing with human freedom, nor as a referee guiding human choice, nor as a heartless power moving pieces on a chess board.

No. Here's a perfectly human story in which, we're told, God has been quietly at work. And the moment Joseph realises it is the moment he finds power to forgive.

"Don't be distressed for selling me into slavery," he says. "Because, really, *you* didn't send me here. *God* sent me to preserve life."

Realising this enlarges his heart. Their petty plots and ambitions have been nested all along within a much larger plot, like those little Russian dolls nested within the largest one. Joseph sees that he and his father and his brothers are actors in God's grand plot.

Seeing this, he has power to forgive. He must put aside revenge. And a good thing too. Because "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind," as Ghandi said.

We don't always know why we do what we do, or live the way we live. It *feels* like we do, and if asked, we can always give reasons. But we may be acting out a larger plot, one we're not yet aware of.

The German writer Thomas Mann, in his novels about Joseph and his brothers, says, "It's possible to be in a plot and not understand it."

Freud popularised the idea of the *unconscious*. He re-fashioned the ancient idea that forces we're not aware of *move* us. They can incite our loves and hates without our realising it. As when, for example, white supremacists *say* their protests are moved by *love* – their love for a statue soon to be removed. But others can see they're moved by *hate* – and beneath the hate, deeper down, fear is pulling the strings.

Without trust in a story of love and justice to thread life together, to explain *why* things are so, life feels like a collision of blind, heartless forces, a biological accident in which pain and pleasure, loving and hating, living and dying have no ultimate meaning. Things just happen. There is no plot.

But to live by faith in the God of Israel is to make a wager that the big story of forgiveness and reconciliation houses our little lives like a big Russian doll housing the smaller ones. When we say of Jesus' life, "God was involved all along," we make a wager that God will make a good story out of our lives too.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, your divine will works in ways we cannot fully fathom and will never be able to control. Take charge of our words and speak through them. Pray in our prayers, and work your will through them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ; for the renewal of the Church's life and mission; that we may be faithful in proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, compassionate in our care for those who suffer, and courageous in our witness to truth and righteousness.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Creator of life, forgive the mess we have made of your world, for the selfishness of nations, for the waste we make of nature, for the injustice done by the powerful to the powerless, and for our own disobedience to your way of love. Give us power to change, to turn and live another way. The give us leaders who are not afraid to confess and to forgive, to be instruments of your will.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of all nations, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, commanded us to love our enemies. Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time bring us all to stand before you, healed, forgiven, and reconciled.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Healing Love, we lift up to you and name in our hearts those who are ill, and all who are passing through times of trial and suffering.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, when you lived among us on earth, you had compassion on the sick and healed them. Have compassion, now, on those who are ill in body, mind or spirit. Make your presence known to them, to relieve suffering and distress, and to restore them to fullness of life, for your great love's sake.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of life and glory, you have given us a share in the inheritance of the saints in light. They surround our steps as we journey on towards the splendour of the eternal city. Open our eyes to see the radiance of your glory; and bring us to rejoice with them in your everlasting kingdom, where there is no dark nor dazzling but one equal light; and where in light undimmed, unending, you are worshipped and adored, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, from whom all things come, and to whom all things return, restore what is lost, heal what is wounded, and gather in those who have been rejected, that all the world may grow in the life of your eternal kingdom.

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, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**