

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

*The 14th Sunday after Pentecost*  
*29 August 2021*

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

*Opening Words*

L: This is the day that the Lord has made.

**P: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

L: Let us worship God.

*Prayers of Adoration and Confession*

Holy One, in you we live and move and have our being. You made us in your image to share your love and learn your truth. You shower gifts and blessings upon your people, for you have sent us Jesus Christ, your very Word in human dress, who died and rose and lives for ever. Fill us, now, with your Holy Spirit, and fashion within us the life of our Lord. Receive our praise, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Lord of mercy, in quiet recollection we sense our distance from you, and from each other. Forgive us for the love we have shown only in word and speech, too rarely in deed and truth. Help us to put our faltering trust in you, for we need your life and strength in ours; and we wish to be rid of everything in ourselves and in our world that harms your heart, and gives you grief.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

**P: Christ, have mercy upon us.**

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, you inspire our faith with a longing for union with you. Grant that we may love what you command and desire what you promise, so that, amid the changes and chances of this uncertain world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy may be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen*

*An Assurance of Pardon*

L: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." 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 One, strengthen and inspire us to do the Word we hear and live the faith we confess; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 45: 1-2, 6-9** (*Love and praise for the monarch*)

My heart is astir with gracious words;  
 as I make my song for the king,  
 my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.  
 You are the fairest of men;  
 full of grace are your lips,  
 for God has blest you for ever.  
 Your throne is God's throne, for ever;  
 the sceptre of your kingdom is the sceptre of righteousness.  
 You love righteousness and hate iniquity;  
 therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
 with the oil of gladness above your fellows.  
 All your garments are fragrant with myrrh, aloes and cassia;  
 from ivory palaces the music of strings makes you glad.  
 Kings' daughters are among your honourable women;  
 at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.\*

*\*(a place famous for its gold and precious stones)*

*(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***

**St Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23** (*Quarrels about tradition and purity*)

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.)

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?'

He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 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, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

**P: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St Mark 7:15** *"...the things that come out are what defile."*

The Jesus we meet in St Mark's Gospel is touchy and angry. He's an antidote to the anodyne Jesus of Pop Christianity.

Some Pharisees made a road trip from Jerusalem to confront him. "You and your people play fast and loose with laws and rules!" they complain. "Your disciples don't even wash their hands before they eat, for God's sake!"

But Jesus barks back. "You hypocrites! You insist on human rules, yet you abandon the commandment of God!"

What's going on here?

Rules and customs are many. But the laws and principles they're built upon are few. Over time, rules ramify and customs complexify. The structure turns top-heavy, and the rules break free from their original reason for being. Like the grin left behind by the Cheshire Cat, they float in the air without foundation. They stop making sense.

Jesus' skirmish with his critics is about laws of ritual purity. He says, in effect, "These rules have come loose from their foundation in God's Will. So, if you think, by keeping them, you're holier than the rest of us, let me tell you you're not."

As usual, Jesus points us to something deeper and more profound than 'being good' in the habitual way. Maybe we need to come unmoored from *that*.

Years ago, a TV commercial peddling a popular brand of water filter showed a glass of water draining and re-filling to the sound of a toilet flushing. A 'voice over' said, "Tap water and toilet water come from the same source. Don't you deserve better?"

It wanted to lead viewers by the nose to an irrational conclusion – "We'd better buy a water filter!" – by creating a flutter of disgust at the silly link it made between drinking a glass of water and flushing a toilet, between 'clean' and 'unclean', between (as Jesus forthrightly puts it) "things that go into a person and things that go out."

Of course, we're right to be cautious about 'what goes in' and to be vigilant in disposing of 'what goes out into the sewer'. We turn up our noses at that piece of chicken left too long in the back of the fridge. It goes into the trash instead of our stomachs. Because it *smells* bad, we say it's *gone* bad. This revulsion is nature's 'law' at work in us, protecting us from poison.

But we don't just live within nature. We live within a human realm of culture and meaning too. We extend these natural feelings about clean and unclean, pure and impure, to the clothes we wear ("is your shirt pure cotton?"), our pets ("is your dog a purebred?"), and the things we use ("let me get you a clean fork"). The idea of using someone else's toothbrush or retrieving food from the garbage (as George Costanza famously did in an episode of *Seinfeld*) seems 'foul'. Never mind if it turns out to be harmless and hygienic 'in fact'. The *idea* repels us.

Captain Cook brought back a word for this idea. It came from people he met when he sailed the South Pacific: 'taboo'. Taboo is driven, not by the natural reality of things, but by our ideas about them and the meanings we assign them.

Rules of hygiene are rooted in nature, but taboos emerge when those rules migrate to the realm of moral purity and religious worth. More than feeling disgust for this or that action, we also feel disgust for the person who does it – even if we later discover it's not un-hygienic after all.

We might turn up our nose at some exotic food from another culture, not because it's 'gone bad', but because it's so strange – grubs-on-toast, let's say, or insect salad. They're not poisonous. They're quite nutritious. Yet we still feel that flutter of disgust.

In some suburbs of North America, if your lawn has too many weeds, or the paint is peeling from your porch, not only will your house be deemed 'dirty' and an 'eyesore', so will *you*. And if your accent is strange, your clothing 'ethnic', your religion odd, your lifestyle weird, you may be called 'immoral'.

The primitive playground of my school was a microcosm of this sort of society, a little laboratory for experiments in cruelty. One child would tag another, and shout, "Bell's Lice!" The tagged child was now 'it' – unclean, impure, infected by 'Bell's Lice' –

until he or she managed to tag another child and pass the ‘infection’ on, a stigma one could ward off only by keeping one’s fingers ‘crossed’.

It sounds like a fun game with silly rules – except that ‘Bell’s Lice’ was named after the Bell family, whose children belonged in that same playground. They were a bit ‘off’, ‘weird’, ‘unclean’, ‘impoverished’. So, they were everyone’s scapegoat. *They* were taboo, and they couldn’t ward it off by crossing their fingers.

They were made to feel they didn’t belong in that playground at all, like the Jews whom the Nazis called ‘vermin’ and tried to exterminate from the face of the earth, which they very nearly did. Not a fun game at all.

But who’s the ‘defiled’ one, really, in such a society? “Don’t you see that whatever goes *into* a person from outside cannot defile?” asked Jesus. “It’s what comes *out* of a person that defiles. For it’s from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”

As his disciples ate with defiled hands, so Jesus ate with defiled people – untouchable, discarded people. Some were truly hated by their society, but not by him. Malicious hearts can disguise themselves, like hypocrites, in a Puritan uniform. But Divine Love calibrates life in a different way. It lets itself be soiled for love’s own sake.

Like the cleansing water that flows from our taps, we all flow from one source – the one from whom all blessings flow.

### *Prayers of Intercession*

Holy One, we lift up our hearts to you. Renew our weary world, heal the hurts of all your children, and bring about your peace in Jesus Christ, the living Lord.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Lord of all, you bless your Church so that your Church may bless the world. You call the poor and outcast to take their place in the festive assembly of your New Covenant. Give power to your Church to honour your presence in the humble and the suffering, and in those who are hated and despised. Make us see each other as brothers and sisters, gathered as one body around your Table.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Loving Lord, in the cross of Jesus Christ you took part in our human condition and felt human sorrow and pain. In our times of misery, show us the transforming power of your divine love. Heal and save all who cry out to you today.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for those whom the world treats badly, neglected by an economy that has no need for them, and ignored by society that feels no responsibility for them.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who work long hours at gruelling jobs for pay too meagre to secure enough food and shelter. Awaken the conscience of rich people, rich nations, and the rich governments who do their bidding.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Holy One, give us grace not to pass by someone's suffering or joy blindly or blithely. Give us eyes to see it, and hearts to share in it. Give us understanding and sympathy, and guard us from selfishness. Helps us to enter into each other's joys and sorrows. Use our labour to gladden each other's hearts.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We remember before you with glad hearts and deep gratitude, those who have died and come alive in the communion of saints ...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Eternal God, help us to entrust the past to your mercy, the present to your love, and the future to your wisdom, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

**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**