

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

18th Sunday after Pentecost
10:30 a.m.
4 October 2020

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

Opening Words

L: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.

P: And God abides in them.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, for we come to worship and adore you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. In your mercy, forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious God, the rock of our salvation, deepen the faith you have bestowed in your Church, and let its power be seen in us; 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: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." 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

Living God, sow your word in our hearts, that we may be rooted in your truth and enlivened by your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 80: 7-15 (*A prayer for Israel's restoration*)

Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.
Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.

Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand planted.

(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

Philippians 3: 4b-14 (*Paul teaches about loss and gain in knowing Christ*)

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Philippians 3:7 *“Whatever gains I had, I regard as loss because of Christ.”*

Paul writes this from prison, not knowing what fate would befall him. Looked at one way – the ‘old way’ – his life had been one loss after another. He’d lost possessions, reputation, wealth. Soon he’d lose his life.

But he was happy with how he’d lived the second half of life. He didn’t hang this happiness on his achievements, though he could have if he’d wanted to. No one could outdo him when it came to the ‘markers’ of success – pedigree, education, career advancement. “If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh” – (and by ‘flesh’ he means ‘worldly accomplishment’) – “If anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more,” he says. “Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Of course, that can be a backhanded way of boasting, can’t it? ‘Humble-bragging’, it’s called. You list your experience and achievements, but then pretend to disparage them. It would be like going to his house and saying, “Hey, is that a Nobel Prize on your mantle?” And he says, “What, that old thing? All it does is collect dust.” But that’s Paul’s point. No one could top him when it came to prize-winning in the ‘old time religion’. He had everything going for him in the world he knew.

What would our equivalent be today, I wonder? It would be someone who ascends the ladder of life without breaking a sweat, who takes ‘top prize’ every time,

whose every endeavour is 'charmed' at every turn. We envy such people, even dislike them. They have what we don't, but want; they *are* what we want to be, but never will be. And yet, that person may 'have it all' and still be deeply unhappy.

Paul 'had it all', religiously. But he says this: I regard everything I had 'going for me' as rubbish. But it's stronger than that. Squeamish censors have been at work on this text. The Greek word he uses really means excrement, manure, feces, dung. "I have suffered the loss of all things," he says, "and I regard them as...well, you know." Why? "In order that I may gain Christ," he says. All his achievements, all his advantages, not only does he regard them as dung, the loss of them is in fact a great gain.

Like you, I want to ask him, "Really, Paul? If you truly mean this, you're either crazy (as many have said), *or* you're perched on the threshold of a great and mysterious truth."

Let's come at it another way. What do we do with the losses in our lives? If life goes as it's 'supposed' to go, we live through a long period of growth and gain, from our youth onward. We grow in knowledge and stature, in wisdom and goodness and skill. And as we grow, we gain. We gain wealth and property, experience and influence. We gain a place to belong, we gain standing in our community – *if* life goes as it's 'supposed' to go. And yet, even if it does go that way, there comes a point in every life (and it may come at any time), when, like the moon tugging the tides that hug the shore, *our* tide of good fortune recedes, and our life once flooded with gain, and the enjoyment of that gain, instead turns to episodes of loss, until loss surmounts our gain, and we're bereft, and we're left with nothing. It may be outward loss of health or income or strength or work or reputation; or it may be an inner loss of confidence or love or self-esteem or faith or trust that the things we wanted in life were the right things after all. And then there's the 'loss of all losses' awaiting each of us, the one certain thing we know will befall us, which is the loss of life itself.

The clue to Christianity, the light it shines, is this: it may only be when we feel our own 'lost-ness', our sorrow – not just the pain of our defeats but the emptiness of our victories too – it's really only *then* that we may be open to experience the redemptive power of God.

St Paul learned not to fight the losses in his life, but to accept and even welcome them. He didn't just accept them as a Stoic would, as something 'to put up with' or 'get through' with grim resignation; or grudgingly, as you or I might do, paying the price for the business of living the way we reluctantly pay our taxes. "Yes, we hate to pay taxes," we sigh, "but we get roads and sewers, schools and hospitals too."

Instead Paul re-interpreted his losses as gains. How? By having his heart sifted by God, and so becoming acquainted with his *true* yearning – which he didn't even know until he fell on his face on the Damascus Road – and so re-evaluating all his former gains, all those boastful achievements, his proud pedigree, those things he'd thought he wanted from life, but in the end did not. They were rubbish, dung.

But were they? How can he denigrate those good things? He says this – he finally admits – because he wants to contrast them with this great and mysterious truth in Jesus Christ, who, by knocking him senseless, actually restored him to his senses, probed his heart, and showed him what his real desire really was all along – a desire for fullness of life, for truth, for goodness, for love, for God – *none of which we can make on our own, all of which we must receive as a gift.* And that is the gospel that changed him.

St Paul's old success and achievement were as dim as dusk next to the light that blinded him on the Damascus Road. All the little 'gold stars' he'd earned cast a dim light next to the brilliance of that sun. The theologian Karl Barth used to say, "All our lamps are turned off in the daylight." He meant all our little efforts to shine with our own power are as nothing beside the light of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

Who needs a flashlight on a bright summer day? What loss could it be to lose everything, and yet live forever in that light?

Prayers of Intercession

We offer prayer to God the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ, for the life and the unity of the Church. Grant us always to acknowledge the lordship of your Son Jesus Christ; keep your Church free from needless quarrel and strife, but to live in love and unity with all who have been baptised in his name.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for a greater reverence for the life that teems in all creation. Eternal God, in all life you live, the true life of all; give us that love for all living things which befits those who believe in you, lest we despise, degrade, or callously destroy your gift. Rather, help us to save and steward it according to your will

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Because it would cheer Christ's heart, we remember before you those who are sick, full of sadness, and suffering from any kind of distress; those who are dying, that as their life draws to a close, you may draw close to them in their need. Uphold their faith, that they may trust and not be afraid; and grant them the comfort and strength of your presence.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who lead others. Fill them with a desire to serve and a love for justice. And save us, who ask so much of those who lead us, from requiring of them virtues we do not practise ourselves.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering now the communion of saints, and with gratitude for those we have loved, who have died we keep silence in your presence...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Mighty God, whose Word we trust, whose Spirit prays in our prayers: accept our prayers this day, and further those which will bring your peace for the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise, world without end.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

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**