

PENTECOST 15

10/9/23

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Even with a congregation of two or three,

you will be present with us, O God.

Even with our record of ignoring and neglect,

you will be present with us, O God.

Even with our questions and doubts,

you will be present with us, O God.

Even as we risk and adventure,

you will be present with us, O God.

Even when our world is turned upside down,

you will be present with us, O God.

We will worship the Ever-Present God.

Opening Prayer

Out of grace beyond imagining, God created us;

we rejoice that we can bring thanksgiving and praise to God.

With the needs of family, friends, and the vulnerable, God has challenged us;

we rejoice that we can call on God to help us meet those needs.

Through the Bible, through the words of leaders, prophets, and Jesus Christ, God has spoken to us;

we rejoice that God's Word is an inspiration and a guide to us.

In the midst of this community of faith, God has given us fellowship;

we rejoice in the friendships and the common acts of service, which are ours.

In a world where inequality reigns, and the powerless struggle, God calls us to act;

we rejoice in the privilege to serve, as Christ has served before us. Amen.

HYMN 134 Praise my soul, the King of heaven

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYEKAEYRcIA>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Let all of us who love God sing a brand-new song of praise.

God our maker, you give us the inside word on right living.

You place us on the highway of wholeness

and make us ready and willing to pound the pavements of wonder and freedom!

You fix us on your promises of blessing and peace,

and the words of our critics bounce right off!

You, Loving God, transform our appetites –

No more cravings for self-centredness.

We're hungering for more God-wisdom

and you, O God, never fail to disappoint!

Our bellies and spirits are full; you offer us the richest of fare!

We thank you and adore you for the ways you captivate us with the flavours of abundant life.

Merciful and gracious God, when we remember that we have been clothed with Jesus Christ from the time of our baptism, we are filled with a sense of wonder and joy that you should care for us so deeply. Such care for us forces us to examine our response to such an outpouring of love on your behalf. Sadly, we confess that there are times when our words and actions, our weak or unconvincing witness deny the existence of your love stitched deep within the fabric of our lives.

When our behaviour is patterned more on the values of the world than the values of Jesus:

forgive us and weave your Spirit anew within us..

When we clothe ourselves with habits which reflect our own selfish desires rather than the selfless nature of Jesus:

forgive us and weave your Spirit anew within us..

When the lives of neighbours are unravelling because of poverty, broken relationships, substance abuse, discrimination, and we fail to love them as Jesus loves us:

forgive us and weave your Spirit anew within us.

When we believe that we have to gather up the loose ends and tangled threads of our lives and our families and communities on our own:

forgive us and weave your Spirit anew within us.

Merciful God, take the frayed strands of our lives and weave them into something beautiful. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear the good news: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. (based on 1 Timothy 1:15) And so I declare to you: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **Exodus 12:1-14**

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, 2 "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. 4 If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You

shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. 11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. 12 I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. 13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

14 “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

- **Romans 13:8–14**

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; 13 let us walk decently as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

- **Matthew 18:15–20**

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one.

¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three

witnesses. ¹⁷ If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

HYMN 628 When I needed a neighbour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fExR7eOhJ00>

SERMON

One of the ways that His enemies attacked Jesus was based on the fact that He kept breaking the religious Laws. Not only that He also started to teach His followers that they did not have to respect that outmoded legal system. I think that these allegations against Jesus were probably correct. Not only did Jesus break many of the Laws of the Torah but also He went on to show people that many of those laws were contrary to how they should behave anyway.

Over time the Christian church has become associated with being advocates for more and more laws and how those who break such laws should be punished.

Generally throughout the Bible there are all sorts of approaches to laws and discipline. Our readings today show us some of them. In the end we are called to live in the light that Paul puts forward for us. “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*” *Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Now let’s turn to the passage from Matthew’s Gospel. This has been relied on as the central text for ‘Christian church discipline’ over the centuries. Basically we are told that when we are offended by someone we should quietly raise the matter personally with that person. If this approach doesn’t work then take one or two others to talk it through again. If that approach still fails to rectify the situation then the matter should be brought before the whole church.

This approach has been used time and again by those administering church discipline within church communities against those who have broken that communities rules and expectations. It has also, at times, been used as an excuse to cover up things which the church has not wanted the world to be aware of. All too often the stage of publicly outing the offender

was forgotten to protect the good name of the church. This was blatantly seen in recent Royal Commission hearings into institutional abuse.

There is an issue which is usually overlooked in the middle of this passage. Some people see it as being like an unexploded bomb. When a person refuses to adhere to the community rules and doesn't respect the rules at the end of the process Jesus says: "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

This is the same Jesus who welcomes tax collectors and Gentiles. Jesus welcomes them and befriends them and invites them to banquets and gets into all sorts of trouble with the establishment for doing this. "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

This flies in the face of how we usually administer church discipline. This shows us more about Jesus' attitude to the Law and how it is administered. This is why Jesus attracted such strident opposition among the religious establishment of His time.

We so often look at these passages like people who have no current understanding of Christ's approach to community. They tend to look at it like the passage from Exodus which is the climax of a tumultuous time in the struggle by the enslaved people in Egypt. It was the start of the Laws around the Passover. This is the culmination of God bringing down bigger and bigger disasters on the reluctant Pharaoh.

This simple cause and effect is the sort of law and order which we are used to. It is even used by diplomats internationally. If we want another government to change some policy which offends us and they refuse to bend to reason this will usually be progressively escalated until the desired result is achieved. This assumes that we are unquestionably right and we often quote the name of God to support our stance. Like the plagues in Egypt from Exodus we use this methodology to sustain our attacks.

This is where we can run into a bit of a hurdle when we carefully reflect on the often-overlooked section of the Gospel passage today. It is so easy to follow the first part of the process up until the person is confronted by the church. When the person still refuses at that stage we come across what has been called an 'unexploded bomb' in the passage. Combining this with the guidelines in Paul's passage we perhaps can start to see a way through this conundrum.

Paul does two things for us. Initially he puts the religious Law into a different perspective by telling us that if we love one another we are already fulfilling that Law. For Paul this means that those old-fashioned Laws are

completely fulfilled in that approach. Those who follow Jesus' teachings are fulfilling the Law.

Secondly Paul shows us why the Laws were necessary in the first place. They were necessary because of quarrelling, jealousy and the desires of the flesh. To keep these under control and to keep society safe those Laws kept behaviour in the community stable to the point that things did not escalate into outright internal war. This is why there was such a strong reaction to Jesus' teaching. Who will keep the community safe if there are no strong rules?

The trouble with human desire is that it can tend to get competitive. When we see others desiring something the value of that item can increase in value in our eyes and so competition starts to own that thing. Just think back to a group of children playing. Suddenly one child might notice a colouring book and a few pencils and then all of a sudden there is a massive rush as all the other children compete for the few resources available.

Human desires can become competitive which can so easily lead to quarrels and jealousy. To combat this we develop a system of laws to stop the conflict. To enforce this we then develop a punishment system to identify offenders and punish them. It is supposed to work like some sort of pressure valve. Eventually this can look like the 'eye for an eye' punishment system but social dysfunction problems can lead to ongoing conflict which can only escalate.

Paul takes up from the radical approach offered by Jesus saying that with love we don't need law. The practice of genuine love leaves the old Law irrelevant and hence no need for discipline. Love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Neither Jesus nor Paul are suggesting that getting rid of the Law will suddenly solve all our problems. The civil law does have a role to play to try get a level of social equilibrium but they are not arguing for a forceful implementation. There is no suggestion of writing people off or making them a sacrifice when they are isolated from the community.

Perhaps one radical message from Jesus is that He is not claiming it as God's way. Most religious people of all faiths, including Christianity, trace their laws and punishment back to their God's teachings. However, Jesus says: "No, God is no Jekyll and Hyde. God has no interest in punishment. God's desire is always and only for mercy and reconciliation."

Jesus is not promoting some new and improved system of law and the consequent discipline. While ever we keep casting jealous eyes on one another we will keep being dragged back to needing those systems of laws and punishments. Jesus does away with that need when He says: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Love your neighbour as yourself."

If we think back to the Epistle reading last week, Paul says that the only thing that he would encourage us to compete over was to show one another greater love and honour. This way to salvation avoids us being caught in a downward spiral of rivalry, violence and revenge. It is not about rules and more rules.

Instead, we are invited to stop imitating the way things used to be done and the resulting jealousy and conflict. We need to follow our natural inclination to imitate but now we are called on to imitate Jesus in His unlimited and never-ending love for others, including tax collectors and Gentiles.

The 'church discipline process' given to us in Matthew 18 then becomes a process of escalating invitation to reconciliation, not some building up of opposing forces. The offender is to be treated as someone who is to be welcomed, loved and accepted but at the end they treated more as a troublesome guest.

It is no wonder that Jesus was regarded as dangerously subversive by the authorities of the day, and no wonder that it continues to be treated as such today. It's no wonder that we constantly try to find justification in the teachings of Jesus for systems of law and social control and divinely sanctioned punishment.

What happened to Jesus when he seriously pursued this is that he was regarded as a threat to social order and stability and since it is better that one die than that the whole nation be destroyed, he was sacrificed by his society.

But in case there was any doubt that this radical new vision of God and of the ethos of God's kingdom had the stamp of approval from God, God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, and Jesus proved, by His own actions, that even the murderous hostility of the authorities and the crowd could not make Him vengeful and punitive.

He stands before us still reaching out to us with wounded hands, and inviting us to turn our backs on the ways of jealousy and vengeful discipline, and to join Him on the pathway of love and reconciliation and life.

HYMN 650 Brother, sister, let me serve you

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttW9oQ-yiuU&t=4s>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Our lives are touched by grace. Let's respond now with generosity and gratitude in giving our offerings.

Lord Jesus, take all that we bring and work it into your dream for the world.
Amen.

PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE

Peacemaking God, Reconciling God,

Be with those on the frontline of danger and conflict,

all those working for a just and loving world –

peacekeepers and community organisers,

activists and social workers –

all those giving their all to bind people together

in places where tensions are strong.

Bless the peacemakers, God,

may they know their honoured place in the family business.

In these places where hurts are deep, and complexity is high, we ask that you help to meet needs, encourage understanding, offer wisdom

and enable a way for people to meet each other with grace.

Raise the odds of forgiveness and help people, where possible and where safe,

to return to each other as brothers and sisters once more.

Bless the peacemakers, God,

may they know their honoured place in the family business.

In our own community, may we do our best to bring our hurts to one another

in the name of reconciliation and friendship.

Help us to be non-defensive with each other, willing to hear each other's concerns,

with as much grace as we can muster on both sides.

If talks break down, help us to be peace-making communities for each other,

communities of grace, transparency, honesty, and collective wisdom,

trusting that you, Christ Jesus, are present in our midst, willing the good in all circumstances.

Bless the peacemakers, God,

may they know their honoured place in the family business.

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and forever. Amen.

HYMN 152 Joyful, joyful, we adore you

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMY3ivdNzwE>

BENEDICTION

We have eaten and tasted the kind of freedom
that draws us into the struggle for justice and freedom for all.
So, eat well and wage peace in a divided world.
Go where the hurt is and work for healing and reconciliation.
And may you know your honoured place in the Divine household
May Jesus' leadership inspire you
And may the Holy Spirit enliven you with the joy of participation.
Go in peace!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74