

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

*14th Sunday after Pentecost*  
*10:30 a.m.*  
*6 September 2020*

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

*Opening Words*

L: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,

**P: and entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.**

L: Let us worship God.

*Prayers of Adoration and Confession*

God most holy, your love made all that is, your truth is at the heart of all things, and by your grace you promise to perfect all you have made. Lifting our voices before you, we gladly sing your praise; lifting our hearts before you, we rejoice that you are God; lifting our lives before you, we worship and adore you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, in your presence we become aware of our need for your correction, and we confess our evasion of it. Forgive our blindness to the things that matter, and the pride that turns us in upon ourselves. Turn our feet from wayward paths, and cause us to see our lives in the light of your costly love.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

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

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, in Christ you reveal your will to forgive, to heal, and to save. Open our ears to your redeeming word and move our hearts by the strength of your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

*An Assurance of Pardon*

L: "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." 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***

O God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Shine upon us now; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 119: 33-40** (*A prayer for a righteous life* )

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,  
and I will observe it to the end.  
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.  
Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.  
Turn my heart to your decrees,  
and not to selfish gain.  
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
give me life in your ways.  
Confirm to your servant your promise,  
which is for those who fear you.  
Turn away the disgrace that I dread,  
for your ordinances are good.  
See, I have longed for your precepts;  
in your righteousness give me life.

*(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 Matthew 18: 15-20** (*Jesus teaches about conflict* )

Jesus said, 'If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If he or she listens to you, you have regained that one.

'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. If he or she 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.

'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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

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

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St Matthew 18:20** *"Where two or three gather in my name, there am I in the midst of them."*

On the other hand, where two or three gather, there's also bound to be conflict in the midst of them. Every kind of community has conflict – schools, families, sports teams, workplaces, neighbourhoods, churches. We need a way to mend the wounds inflicted by conflict, don't we?

"If someone sins against you," says Jesus, "go and tell them when the two of you are alone."

At first glance, this sounds like old-fashioned common sense, not a new revelation. We don't need a Gospel to invent it, a Saviour to teach it, or faith in God to follow it. It makes good sense apart from all that. And yet, it's a very hard rule to follow.

It takes courage to say to someone, "What you've done has hurt me. Stop it. Fix the damage you've done." Sometimes we fear confrontation. We'd rather appease, ignore, or put up with those who harm us. The trauma of facing them pains us more than the harm they do to us. We 'let it go' instead. Injustice persists.

It also takes much maturity to hear those words of accusation when they're levelled against us. We can't stand being 'in-the-wrong'. We'd rather deny, lash out, lie, or simply avoid that person than admit our fault and repair the damage we've done. Once again, injustice persists.

When that happens, the accuser needs help.

"If you're not heard, take one or two others with you to be your witnesses," says Jesus. Isn't that what marriage counsellors and conflict mediators do? They witness the dispute. They serve as the 'go-between'. They can repeat, in a calm, objective voice, what each party has tried but failed to get the other one to hear. And lo, sometimes it works!

But what if it doesn't? "Then take it to the next level," says Jesus.

But what if *that* doesn't work? "Then let them be to you as Gentiles and tax collectors."

In other words, acknowledge this breach in the community's concord, this persistent, unhealed injustice, and put an end to it. A child having a tantrum needs to

be taken for a 'timeout'; a violent, unrepentant criminal needs incarceration; and an habitual bully needs exile from the community. Such punishment, though it fails at full reconciliation, at least puts the brakes on persistent injustice.

And yet, even when I was made to stand with my face in the corner of the classroom for my persistent misbehaviour, the teacher would say, "Maybe *this* will teach you a lesson!"

This is why 'discipline' is another word for punishment. Discipline punishes, not for reprisal and revenge, but to teach us a lesson we're not 'getting' in any other way. It's why prisons are called 'penitentiaries'. They're places where prisoners might learn to be penitent. 'Reformatories' are homes where delinquents might learn to reform their lives. Good discipline aims at good teaching. Learners are disciples.

So, when Jesus says, "Let them be to you as Gentiles and tax collectors," he doesn't mean, "To hell with *them!*" Didn't Jesus befriend those who'd been cast out? Wasn't he cast out himself? He once told those ultimate insiders, the chief priests and elders, that "tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of *you.*"

This is where the 'new revelation' we call the Gospel comes in. It enters our lives at the point where faith in our Saviour ushers us into a community of eternal reconciliation, i.e., 'the Church'. We discover our need for a Saviour and a community of fellow disciples at that point where our own common sense and good will are simply not enough.

"When two or three gather in my name" – even when we gather in conflict! – "I am there in your midst," says Jesus.

He doesn't say he's necessarily on 'this side' or 'that side' of the conflict. He's on the side of justice. He's on the side of reconciliation. And in that way, he's *present*.

The Gospel reveals this to be God's eternal will. Injustice shall not persist forever. Neither, then, can two disciples – two 'learners in Christ' – be excommunicated from each other forever. They're like a quarrelling couple who've forgotten that they love each other. Or rather, their quarrelling has become their *only* way of loving each other.

And yet, because they share a faith in this Saviour, it's as though they're joined by a giant bungee cord. They can only run so far from each other before it pulls them back with a swift, sharp 'snap'. Such is the pulling power of God's reconciling, sacrificial love. It restores justice and reconciles enemies. We're all bound to feel that 'snap'. One day.

### ***Prayers of Intercession***

God of grace and glory, we offer the praise that is your due, for the gift of life and all its blessings, and we commit ourselves once more into your keeping.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Loving Lord, confirm in unity and truth the Church you gather in Christ. Until that day when we gather in your house to give voice to our common prayer, and to hear your Word with joy, help us to hold fast the truth embedded in our faith, to live fully in this moment, and to hope for a future fashioned by your grace.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

God of wisdom, we pray for children who return to their schools this week. Give them a desire to learn the lessons of greatest worth. Keep them healthy in body, strong in spirit, and curious in mind, that they may find wisdom, and learn of your purpose for their lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for teachers and principals, school administrators and supervisors, and for those who clean and care for school buildings. Keep them safe and healthy. Give them fresh devotion to their calling, and a true love for those they serve.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who suffer sorrow and pain in body, mind, or spirit. O Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that out of suffering can spring compassion and caring, faith and endurance, and humility in knowing that you suffered too. We bring to you all those known to us who are in any kind of need. Give them healing, courage and hope. Let your peace be with them.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for the poor and oppressed: for victims of war and famine, victims of arrogant wealth and power run amok, for victims of climate devastation, both human and animal life, and for all who suffer from affliction or strife. O Lord, hear the cries that rise from earth to heaven, and show your mercy to people exhausted by suffering, who have seen too much death and endured too much loss.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Eternal God, we give thanks for those who have died, for those who loved and served you in this world, and hoped in you for the world to come. Give us a firm faith that nothing will separate us from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*...

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

God our Maker, from whom all things come and to whom all things return, give us such healing and strength that we may know your love and live with joy.

**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***