

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

*19th Sunday after Pentecost (Harvest Thanksgiving)
10:30 a.m.
11 October 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: The Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever,

P: God's faithfulness to all generations.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy Creator, with the fullness of love overflowing, your Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, and you called all things into being: earth, sky, and sea. You made the world to be a haven for every kind of life: tree and flower, animal and insect, fish and bird. And you made us to bear your image, to enjoy and care for your creation. Our cup overflows. By your Spirit, move through us now, and draw from us the harvest of faith, hope and love.

Confiding in your mercy, we confess our need for your pardon and peace. Are we rich in things but poor in soul? Have we spoiled your garden and soiled your image in us? Free us from greed, and envy, and fear of scarcity. Give us grace to act with justice, speak the truth, and live each day by faith in you. And if our kind must have an enemy, let it be our war-like pride.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, in Creation and in Christ you richly bless us with all that we need, bread from the earth and the bread of heaven, giving life to the world. Grant us one thing more: grateful hearts to sing your praise, in this world and the world to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *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

Living Lord, lead us in the way, instruct us in the truth, and fill us with the life that is eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 106: 1-6, 19-23 ()

Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all his praise?

Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them;

that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage.

Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image.

They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.

They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

Therefore, he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

(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 22: 1-14 (*Jesus tells a parable about a wedding banquet.*)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

‘Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went

away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.

'The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

'Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so, the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Matthew 22:5 *But they made light of it and went away.*

Here's a parable we'd rather not hear. It speaks of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness'. Mind you, we all know people we wouldn't mind sending there, don't we? But parables aren't newspaper reports. We should never take them literally. Their violence is no more real than the battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* are real. And yet, in another sense, they're *true*, aren't they? Jesus' parables show us something true about life, or God, or both, but in the guise of a story.

"The kingdom of God is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son," he says. The king commands his servants: "The feast is ready! Tell those who've been invited to come." But they do not come. "They made light of it and went away," says Jesus. It's a host's worst nightmare, to set the table and no one comes. Worse, they insult the king's servants, beat them up, and even kill a few.

Why, I wonder? There are 'guest lists' some people clamber and scheme to get on. They indicate status, and status is a sign of importance. The higher on the guest list, the closer to the king you are, and the more important you must be. Who'd make light of their place on a king's guest list? Only someone who says to himself, "This elite party is beneath me. That's just how elite *I* am. I'll not go to this party. I'll make *not* showing up the new sign of an even higher status." It reminds me of what Yogi Berra said about a famous New York restaurant: "No one goes there anymore. It's too crowded," he said.

But no crowd came to the king's feast. "They made light of it." Shouldn't this make us pause to ask ourselves, "What have *we* made 'light of'? What invitations has life extended to us whose meaning we misjudged? How many benefactors have we mistreated? What gestures of friendship have we brushed off? What doors were opened for us, but we turned away? Did we honestly mistake their significance, their 'weight', so we 'made light' of them? Or did we deem it all 'beneath' us; or worse, we scorned the giver, the way the wedding guests scorned the king.

A furious king exacts a king's revenge. He sends his army to trounce those people. And then, as if to say, "Fine, I don't need *you* to have a feast anyway," he throws open the doors to his banqueting house: "Go into the streets and invite everyone you find," he commands. "So, they gathered all whom they found, *both good and bad*," says Jesus. "Both good and bad." Suddenly, status means nothing. All that matters is that the seats be filled. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." This feast must and shall happen.

Both judgment and redemption are at work here, aren't they? There's *judgment* because God loves us fiercely enough to batter our hearts with truth, to wean us from every dazzling idol that blinds us to God's invitation to 'life in sacred fullness'. Love can be furious and still be love, can't it? An anger-less love who simply cheers us on, who waves the flag we wave, who hates only what we hate and likes exactly what we like, wouldn't be the God who makes and redeems all things. It would just be our puppet, our idol, our golden calf.

But there's *redemption* here, too, because love's anger only wants to rescue its wayward creatures – people like us, wandering lost in a wilderness of folly and mistakes. To stumble home and find the one who made us, led us, and judged us is now our host – like the prodigal who falls into the arms of his waiting father, who hosts a feast to honour him – *that's* the parable of all our lives.

To miss this redemption, never to take our seat at the royal banquet, to 'make light of it', or turn it down with lame excuses and trivial pursuits, is to miss the one important thing for which our little lives are a long preparation. To stare in the mirror one morning, and suddenly realise we've lived a shallow life, that we've 'made light' of God's call and claim upon us, *that* would be the harshest judgment of all, wouldn't it? Not *God's* condemnation – for Christ came not to condemn the world, but to save it – but *self*-condemnation.

This judgment is not quaking with fear in the prisoner's box before a black-robed judge. It's not punishment meted out for offenses committed. It's more like strolling down a pretty, country road all day long, only to find, as the sun sinks and the chill sets in, that we've been on the wrong road all along, and now we're lost in a dark bit of the wood. And what's that we hear? It's the 'weeping and gnashing' of our own teeth. It's not that we've chosen a *wicked* path instead of a good one. Life rarely presents choices

so stark. Usually we meet, not evil, but *degrees* of good. But how often we settle for the 'merely' good, the lower road, and 'make light' of the best that beckons us.

Then we feel like the mute man at the end of Jesus' parable, not properly dressed for a feast because he never thought to clothe his life for the presence of a king. Maybe the wedding garment he was supposed to wear was the white robe the first Christians wore at their baptisms to signify their new life in Christ. "As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ," said St Paul to the Galatians.

The New Testament word for judgment, in Greek, is *crisis*, and I think that's revealing. Every crisis – whether it's one we've brought on ourselves or one that visits us from without – forces some response, some decision on our part. That's why Jesus was himself God's judgment, God's *crisis* in the world. How else could our redemption happen? He provoked people, he called their lives into question, and his invitation to 'life in sacred fullness' forced them to decide whether to follow him or not.

He still does this. But he won't be our puppet; that way lies idolatry, the golden calf who endorses us without judgment, and never saves a single soul. But Jesus' way is the way of the cross, which is where our judgment *and* our redemption truly happen. There, God opens wide the gates to his banqueting house, to *our* seat at *his* table, a thanksgiving feast fit for a king's only begotten son.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord of all life, with all your creatures, great and small, we offer praise for your goodness. In the harvest of land and ocean, in the turning of the seasons and the circling of the earth, you reveal your truthful mind and loving heart for all creation. For the bread within the grain and the seed within the fruit, we give you thanks and praise. And for our life, rooted in creation but fulfilled in Christ, we join the whole Church to give you praise.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, we pray for your whole Church. Look upon us in love. You prepare a table before us to satisfy the hungry heart. Strengthen us with the nourishment of your truth, that we may be people of justice and peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Have mercy on those who are sick and suffering in any way, with hearts full of grief, bodies tormented by pain, or spirits downcast by despair. Do not let the pain of their affliction and the sorrow of their journey obscure the presence of our Lord at their side.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

As the autumn harvest is gathered in, we give thanks for our daily bread. We pray for those who have not enough, and for those who have too much. Teach us to share, to cherish people more than profit. Set our hearts on your kingdom of love and justice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for all who farm the land and all who gather the harvest of the seas, that they may know the dignity and worth of their service, and be justly rewarded for their toil.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering those who have died, with thanks for the communion of saints, who have reaped the harvest of faith, we keep a time of silence in God's presence...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*...

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, may we love your creation, all the earth and every grain of sand. May we love every leaf, every ray of your light. May we love the animals. You have given them a capacity for joy untroubled. Let us not trouble them; let us not harass them, let us not deprive them of their happiness, or work against your purpose for them. For we know that to withhold any measure of love from anything in your care is to withhold that same measure from you. For all things come from you, and all things desire to return to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

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**