

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

*The 6th Sunday after Pentecost
4 July 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: Happy are they who hear the Word, holding it fast in an honest heart,

P: and bear its fruit with patient endurance.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of all goodness and source of all beauty, your love is new every morning. Yours is the light that makes the light that makes the day. You alone are God, above, beyond and within all creation. Strengthen our faith, illumine our hearts, and place your guiding hand upon us. We worship and adore you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Holy One, we bring our restless lives into the peace of your presence. Help us to confide in your mercy as we confess our brokenness and need. We confess the sins that no one knows and the sins that everyone knows; the sins that burden us and the sins we shrug off because they do not trouble us. We seek your forgiveness and healing.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Loving God, you are the Guardian of the weak, and you watch over those who are overlooked. Turn the places we live into temples of your presence, citadels of your justice, and strongholds of your love, that the most vulnerable and the most powerful may dwell side by side share in your peace; 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: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." 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, give us wisdom born in humility, that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture, we may hear your truth and know your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 123 (*A plea for mercy*)

To you I lift up my eyes
 you who are enthroned in the heavens.
 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master
 or as the eyes of a maid toward the hand of her mistress,
 So our eyes look to the Lord our God
 until he show us his mercy.
 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us
 for we have had our fill of derision.
 Our souls overflow with the mockery of those at ease
 and with the contempt of the proud.

(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

2 Corinthians 12: 1-10 (*God's power reveals itself in weakness*)

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

2 Corinthians 12:9 *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*

How can this be? Power and weakness are opposites. Opposites oppose each other like oil and water, don't they? In a tug-of-war, weakness loses every time.

In Westerns, when two cowboys argue in the saloon, the bartender tells them to 'take it outside', as if a fist fight could decide which one is right. But 'might' does not make 'right'. They're not linked. We may as well measure someone's virtue by timing how long they can hold their breath.

Centuries ago, the Church imprisoned Galileo to *make* him stop saying the earth moves around the sun. "OK, OK," he said. "The earth doesn't move around the sun. Happy now?" But then he's supposed to have whispered under his breath, "*And yet it moves.*" The power of Rome couldn't undo the truth. 'Might' does not make 'right'.

Which brings us to St Paul. Paul found himself in the unhappy position of having to defend himself in an old-fashioned 'power struggle'. Some cast doubt on his integrity and motives. They said their experience of God was superior and their 'spirituality' was *stronger* than his was. They were spiritual show-offs.

Paul defended himself – not for his own sake, but for the sake of his calling and the God who'd called him. And though the contest couldn't be decided by a bar room brawl, it did have the feel of a 'might makes right' sort of battle. It was an ugly boasting match.

First Paul said this: "I *won't* boast. Boasting is foolish." Then he does it anyway. "Maybe I will boast," he concedes, but right away adds this: "*Nothing is to be gained by it.*" Still, he presses on. He says that, as it happens, no one can outdo him when it comes to the potency of his calling and his depth of spiritual insight. *So there.*

"I know a person in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven," he says. "He heard things that can't be told." But he's speaking about *himself*.

He's saying something like this: "I'm not going to play your power game. Of course, if we *did* have a boasting contest, I'd win it 'hands down'. You know that, right?"

But what would I win, really? It would be *my* boasting muscles out-punching *yours*. It would be one more game of ‘might makes right.’ What would that prove? Nothing.”

Then comes the extraordinary part, the part the Gospel makes possible. Paul takes off his boxing gloves. He boasts, now, not about his strength, but about his scars and stitches, his physical disability, and the agony of it.

He says this: “To keep me from being too elated” – to take away all temptation to boast, in other words – “a thorn was given me in the flesh.” No one knows what this ‘thorn’ was. Paul never tells us. But it was *evil* to him, “a messenger of Satan sent to torment me.” It pained him enough to pray, three times, that it be taken away. It wasn’t.

We know what this is like, don’t we? Who hasn’t bled from life’s thorns and afflictions – from physical, mental, and spiritual pain – and turned to the heavens to cry, “Enough! I can’t take it. Take away this pain!” *And God doesn’t.*

Even Jesus prayed a prayer like that. “Take this cup from me!” And God didn’t.

Here’s the answer Paul received: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

What does this mean?

It means power reaches its goal when it comes to the aid of weakness. Think of the Good Samaritan. A gang of thieves had used their power to rob and beat someone. But a Good Samaritan bent down to lift him up. *That’s* power realising its real purpose – not in Olympian perfection but in the very strife of life.

Paul faced the Corinthians who wanted to put him down: “You want to get into a boasting contest? Alright, I’ll boast about my *weakness* then. Because it’s through weakness that God’s power comes to us. That’s why I’m an effective apostle. It’s not me; it’s the grace of God *in* me.”

It seems that God loves broken things. He rarely chooses spiritual Olympians. They’re off winning medals for themselves. But through our failures and sins, our wounds and sufferings, God gets access to us, and grace flows in.

We, in turn, gain access to the richer depths of human experience. We discover the fertile soil of humility from which good things grow and our lives transform. We learn not to resent our disabilities, for God’s glory happens *through* them. And although this truth is difficult to trust, our Lord embodied it and showed it to be true.

Remember when he stood before Pilate, handcuffed and beaten?

“Are *you* some sort of king?” asked Pilate. Pilate needed to know. Does this man have followers? Are they armed? Should he call up the National Guard?

Jesus said something like this: “If my kingdom were of this world – I mean, if it were true in a *God’s* eye view that ‘might makes right’ – then I would fight you, Pilate, sword for sword. But might does not make right. Right is mighty all on its own.”

More powerful than power is truth itself. More forceful than force is love. And stronger than brute strength is the spirit of justice.

Jesus said something more to Pilate. “For this I was born, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.”

To *hear* Jesus Christ, to receive his words of truth and to witness to their effect on our lives, in all our “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities,” is indeed to belong to the truth – not to *have* the truth, not to *own* the truth, and certainly not to wield the truth like a club – but to *belong* to the truth.

To belong to his truth – the truth that shines in the sun and stars, in the web of life all around us, and in the body who was wounded by a crown made of *thorns* – is to have all the power we need to live our lives deeply and richly, now and in eternity.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy and living Lord, fill us now with joy and peace in believing. Fill us with trust in your will for the world. Let your Holy Spirit breathe within us and pray through us.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the living body of Christ, and for its peace and well-being within Elmwood Avenue Church. Help us to love the world all around us. Fill us with desire to love and serve those who live alongside us. Grant us, inwardly, the healing we need, bestowed by your love in the hidden chambers of our hearts.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, when you walked the earth among us, you had nowhere to rest your weary head. We pray for those who have no home in a harsh world, no shelter from danger, no bed or pillow for the refreshment of sleep. Help us to help them, and to see an image of your face in theirs.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Creator of life, we praise you for the beauty of summer. Give us eyes to treasure the natural world, and to delight in the vigour of life in full bloom. Give us grateful hearts to savour the fruits of the land, each in its due season, to enjoy long hours of daylight. Help us to see ourselves as part of your good creation, and not apart from it.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who suffer. Soothe their pain, lift their burdens, relieve their worry, comfort their hearts, restore their troubled minds, and mend their broken bodies. When they reach for you on the day of trouble, let them find your hand already reaching for them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Just and loving One, we hear and watch the trouble unfolding in the events of our world. Can you not hear the cries of anger at injustice? Do you not see the pain from violence inflicted on innocence? Give us good leaders who will make our world just and right. But make us unhappy with ourselves until we demand that our leaders put peace for the oppressed, justice for the weakest, and the integrity of all creation before all else.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of all nations, keep us in communion with you, with each other, and with those whom we love dearly, especially those who have died and now rest from their labours...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*...

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Risen Lord, when we forget you, it is we who are absent. You remain present at all times, deep within us. Enable us to receive you with a trusting heart, and to live each day by faith in you and for your glory, nothing more.

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**