

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

*The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
18 July 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: "My word shall accomplish that which I purpose," says the Lord,

P: "and it will succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God most holy, you are light to the minds that know you, life in the souls that love you, and strength for the hearts that seek you. To turn from you is to fall; to turn to you is to rise; to abide in you is to stand fast forever. Glory be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our one true and living God.

Holy Lord, we hope in your mercy. Give us sorrow for our sins. Hold them not against us, but forgive. Bring us new life where we are weary and worn and tired. Give us compassion where we are hard of heart, and place a new joy in the places where we are sad. Set us free from all that holds us down. Then raise us up, forgiven and healed, to a new life in Christ.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Eternal God, you draw near to us in Christ and make yourself our guest. Amid the cares of our daily lives, make us attentive to your voice and alert to your presence, that we may treasure your Word above all else; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with your and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The Lord is our light and salvation. Whom shall we fear?" 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 of compassion, calm the clamour in our hearts, and hush within us any voice but your own; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

*The Psalm for the Day***Psalm 89: 20-37** (*God's servant King*)

I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
He shall cry to me, "You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!"
I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
For ever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.
I will establish his line for ever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.
If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
His line shall continue for ever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.

It shall be established for ever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.'

(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

Ephesians 2: 11-22 *(Christ is our peace)*

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So, he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Thanks be to God.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Ephesians 2:14 *"Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility."*

Some doors say 'Please Enter'. Some say 'Keep Out'. In the early days of the Church, the door in the wall between Jews and Gentiles said 'Keep Out'.

Yet the first Christians were ‘insiders’ already. They were Jews, just as Jesus was. They didn’t think God had torn up the old covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They believed God had *fulfilled* its ancient promise.

The entrance door would not say ‘Keep Out’ forever. That had been the promise. One day it would say ‘Please Enter’ to every nation and every human being. That day came with the coming of Jesus Christ. He opened the door to all humanity. Forever.

Right away, a question arose. Does this mean Gentiles must now become Jews? What would that look like?

We sometimes demand this of immigrants. “We opened the door to let you in. But if you’re going to live alongside us, you’d better look like us and talk like us.”

What about Gentiles then? If they’re allowed to enter this Jewish covenant, shouldn’t they look and talk and act in a Jewish way? Shouldn’t they accept circumcision and follow the dietary laws? That was a thorny question in the early days of the Church. Some said, “Yes!” Others said, “No!”

The letter to the Ephesians is firmly in the *no* camp. It says to Gentile Christians that, yes, they too are heirs, by adoption, of this ancient covenant. But they need not hide all their Gentile differences. They need not conform to Jewish practice and law. Difference is allowed. They just need to aim to be Christ-like. That’s the difference that matters.

Something *new* came into being because of Jesus Christ. It’s a new kind of person in a new kind of community. The door to this community is propped permanently open because it is, in principle, a *universal* community.

There will be “one new humanity in place of two”, says Ephesians, not because everyone must look, talk, and think alike, but because they all belong to the one body of Christ, the Church, in whom they all “have access in one Spirit to the Father”. They’re all in touch with the same *source*, in other words.

There’s no other community like this. You don’t have to belong to a specific race or ethnicity. You don’t have to speak a specific language. You don’t need to pass a means test, a citizenship test, an intelligence test, or a skills test. You can bring your culture with you. You can come as you are. In this home you won’t be ‘a stranger and alien’. You’ll be a “citizen with the saints, a member of the household of God.”

Groucho Marx used to say, “I’d never belong to a club that would have *me* as a member.” But even Groucho is welcome in Christ’s Church. The only requirements are these: you must be human, and you must want the adventure of following Jesus Christ.

But be warned. The Church may change you after all – not because you’ll be made to shed your immigrant clothing and wear the team uniform, but because your *heart* will change as you fall under the sway of Jesus Christ and gather at his Table.

“*Christ* is our peace,” Paul tells the Gentile Christians.

For a battle to end and for peace to arrive someone must make the first move. Someone must make a gesture of acceptance and welcome. Jesus did this.

Isn't that what one of his most famous parables is about? There's a Prodigal Son, a runaway *outsider*. And there's an Older Brother, a consummate *insider*. But there is no peace between them. They cannot sit at the same Table.

There's also an astonishing Father. He will not discriminate between who's *in* and who's *out*. The Father waits on the threshold of their home, holding the door ajar. He holds his arms open in a gesture of welcome. The gesture says, "Please Enter!"

Doesn't he look like a 'weak' Father, a pushover? Doesn't he have standards? Rules? Requirements? Can't he command conformity from his wayward children? What's wrong with him? Does he have no authority to stand upon?

Yes, he does. He stands upon the strongest force in the universe, which is the love who can pierce every wall of hostility that divides us from each other. This love has already 'made the first move', placing the possibility of peace within us and between us. That's the love we need. That's the love we *have* in Jesus Christ.

To be upheld but not 'possessed', to be accepted but not imprisoned, to enjoy the freedom to be different, to be ourselves and therefore be free *for* each other: this is what Christ does for us, through his cross. He remakes us into "one new humanity," says Paul. *This* makes all the difference.

It's so much easier to include and welcome others once we feel *we* have been welcomed and included, isn't it? "Please enter." When the Church is true to its Lord, it keeps its door propped open. It embodies the welcome of Jesus Christ.

Prayers of Intercession

O Lord our God, in every time and place your people call upon you, rejoicing in your love and cherishing your truth. We lift up our lives to you in prayer, and call upon you for our salvation.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, by your cross and resurrection you ended all enmity and broke down the walls that divide us from you and from each other. Look with compassion on the broken body of your Church. Heal our divisions, unite us in your truth, and make us instruments of your peace in the life of the world.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Gracious God, your love knows no bounds, no limits, and no distinctions. We pray for those from whom we differ in religion, race, culture, and politics. Help us to hear and understand each other, and to love each other in the way we are loved by you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We hold up to you, now, the victims of violence in all its forms. Bring your justice to bear upon our world. Can you see how we fight over race, class, sex, creed,

and shallow differences of opinion? Stop us from hiding behind walls made from hate, from loving only our own kind and fearing all others. Teach us to see your face in their faces too.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who give themselves to the art of healing and caring for others, for nurses, support workers, counsellors, and physicians of every kind; give them skill and compassion; renew your strength within them, and give them joy in their calling.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those afflicted by despair, whose lives feel meaningless, who suffer the anguish of inner darkness, and find nothing of worth within themselves. Pierce their soul's dark night with the light that darkness can never extinguish. Let it shine within them and shine forth from them. Restore their joy.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Merciful God, we dream of a new heaven and earth. We remember, with great gratitude, those who have died and come awake in your presence, for the dreams they shared with us, for the good that entered the world through them, and for everything they were, by nature and by your grace...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, remember us when we cannot see your way or purpose. Take our hands and work with them; take our lips and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them ablaze with love for you, for all people, and for all creation.

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**