

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
August 16, 2020 11th Sunday after Pentecost

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

How difficult it is for us to accept love, especially love that is freely given,
with the only desire for the lover that we live our best lives.
This is the gift of God,
to accept God's love and live out our lives in the best way possible.
Today we explore that kind of love. As we do, we begin with a call to worship.

Call to Worship

Come and worship, all you who love and serve the Lord—
outsiders and insiders,
old-timers and new-comers,
the young, old and the in-between.
Come as you are,
for this is God's house—a house of prayer for all people,
and God welcomes each one who comes.

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper15A>

Hymn

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven

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1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
to his feet thy tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who like me his praise should sing?
Praise him, praise him,
praise him, praise him,
praise the everlasting King.
2. Praise him for his grace and favour
to our fathers in distress;
praise him, still the same forever,
slow to chide and swift to bless;
praise him, praise him,
praise him, praise him,
glorious in his faithfulness.
3. Father-like he tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands he gently bears us,
rescues us from all our foes:
praise him, praise him,
praise him, praise him,
widely as his mercy flows.
4. Frail as summer's flower we flourish;
blows the wind and it is gone,
but, while mortals rise and perish,
God endures unchanging on:
praise him, praise him,
praise him, praise him,
praise the high eternal One.
5. Angels, help us to adore him,
ye behold him face to face;
sun and moon, bow down before him,
dwellers all in time and space,
praise him, praise him,
praise him, praise him,
praise with us the God of grace.

Words and music: public domain

Opening Prayer

Welcoming and generous God, you make all things new.
We are glad to be together joined in prayer this day.
You invite all people into your fold to receive your blessing.
Justice and right relations have their source in you.
We are filled with joy to be counted among your children.
As we gather, make us one in worship and thanksgiving.
We lift our voices to proclaim your all-encompassing love.
May our praise join with the praise of all your people.
And reach the ends of the earth, for you are our Saviour and our hope.
Open our ears and our eyes to you this day through song,
scripture, prayer and message.

Merciful and wise God,
In your presence we confess that we have not lived as you taught us to live.
Forgive us those times we have not welcomed others into our community;
and those times we have avoided others
because something about them made us uncomfortable.
Forgive us the ways we have judged unfairly.
Reveal to us our own prejudice which separates us from others
and our failure to seek your goodness in those who seem different from us.
We ask this in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

Friends, the gifts and the calling of God
are irrevocable.

Receive the gift of forgiveness
and share that gift with others,
in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Feasting on the Word Worship Companion: Liturgies for Year A, Volume 2 ©2014 Westminster John Knox Press

Scripture Reading Romans 11:1-2a, 29-36

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

³³O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵“Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a

gift in return?" ³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

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The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Message Irrevocable Love

Transactions, that is how we do life. We purchase something and receive something in return. One of the most satisfying moments is when you get something for a real bargain. Think of the Ikea Summer ad campaign where the woman who has just purchased a number of items, looks at her receipt, hurries out of the store and begin to yell at her husband, "Start the car! Start the car!" As they drive away there is the unspoken "We got away with it", with the audible, "Whoo!" moment. We purchase and receive.

We also do other parts of our lives in that way. How often have you felt that when someone has you over for a meal the expectation is that you will invite them over to your home in return. Or someone has bought you a birthday or Christmas gift and you felt an obligation to do the same back even when you had not originally intended to have the person on your gift shopping list. It seems to be part of the social order that relationships have a transactional component to them.

Whether it be a gift, a return invite, or good deeds, we often keep a mental score card of how people have treated us or we them. There is a tendency in relationships to keep an invisible record of hurtful words spoken or things undone as well as where we have fallen short. We compare relationships like we compare prices.

So often when we purchase something we think, I earned this, or in relationships think we deserve certain treatment because of all that we have done. It can also be the opposite where we think we deserve the abuse we are getting because we are convinced, we are not good enough. We think that our good works or lack of, even our intentions should add up to something, should mean something, should be worth something. And maybe that is not all bad when it comes to our human relationships. Accountability for how we treat others though should not be based in bargaining, deserving, or earning favor, but rather accountability should come from a place of care and compassion, not "what is in it for me."

Because of how we think and behave, it is hard to imagine that God does not operate the same way we do. Afterall, as I shared last week, we are called to be image bearers of God. Yet, not everything about us is God like. Image bearers of God are faithful, gracious, and merciful, not really traits that come naturally to human beings. We tend to be self-serving, fickle, and judgemental, especially when it comes to other humans.

When considering our relationship with God our natural inclination seems to be disobedience. For the Apostle Paul, disobedience is about sin and sin is about abusing the gifts and ignoring the call of God. Sin is not a moral compass or tally of good and bad behavior as such.

Paul writes earlier in Romans that there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks, in other words the people God chose, whose story we find in the Old Testament, and the new believers in Christ, “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) This is important to note, because God made promises to the Israelites, the very people who were continually being disobedient by turning away from God and letting their natural human tendencies reign over them. Now if those promises can be broken by God, then how could new Christians trust that God would keep God’s promises to them, for we too spend a lifetime turning away from God. If God promises to the people of the Torah do not need to be kept, how can we trust today that God will keep God’s promises to us.

This is the relevance of this passage of scripture from Romans 11. It is actually much of the relevance of the whole of the letter to the Romans. All this has more to do with God’s character, than it does about our behavior. It is about God’s faithfulness to people even when we are not faithful. Paul is very concerned with the fact that the Israelites have not accepted the Good News of the Gospel, the knowledge and belief that through Jesus we are freed to live out our vocation of being image bearers of God, that in Jesus something significant happened, “as a result of which the world became a different place, inaugurating God’s future plan...Jesus’s resurrection was the first sign that it was indeed under way.”¹

What Paul ultimately determines is that he cannot know the mind of God. He acknowledges that there is no way in hell that God has turned his back on the Israelites, even if Jesus has come and many have not believed. God is faithful and if God is faithful to the people who God chose through Abraham, then God will be faithful to all believers. God will be faithful to all people.

This is the free gift of grace offered by God to every person – every person! Being people who live our lives in transactional ways, it can be difficult for us to accept such a free gift. We feel that we should be indebted, that we should have to earn God’s favor, but that is not how God works. God loves all people regardless of what we might think about ourselves or anyone else for that matter. And God’s gifts to us and the calling of God on our lives are irrevocable. We may not choose to accept the gifts or the calling, but they are there – always – for us to receive and accept at anytime, and as many times as we turn from God and come back. God is merciful, desires you to live the best way you can in relationship with God, yourself, and others.

This can be interesting given the times we live in. I have more than once heard people say that the pandemic is God’s way of straightening out the world, that other illnesses such as AIDS, or natural disasters were part of God’s punishment, but none of that jives with the character of God. God is faithful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Paul states in chapter 8 of Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor

¹ Wright. N.T. The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion. Harper Collins Publishers. New York. 2016. P34.

powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (8:38-39)

God may use our circumstances to bring us into right relationship with God’s self and with others, but this is all done out of love, out of the promises of a covenant relationship with God. God’s greatest, inexplicable desire is to be in relationship with the likes of me and you, because of love. A love that sent God’s own Son to become human flesh, so that God might do what no law or person could do - open up a new way for us to live - where the world could become a different place, where people could accept the gifts of God, gifts of love, mercy, and grace, and in turn accept the call of God to be image bearers of God to others.

Image bearers of God bring love, mercy, grace, and compassion to every interaction and it is not a transaction. It is very one sided, needs nothing in return, offers love without judgement, or the need to be loved in return. As our relationship deepens with God, we may feel a need to be accountable and to love God in return, but that comes from a place of trust and faith.

In our humanness we want to explain, analyze, and understand, and that is okay, but there is a point at which we must accept that some things, like the irrevocable calling, gifts, and love are God are mystery.

Paul sums it up with these thoughts and a doxology, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To [God] be the glory forever. Amen. (11:33-36)

Closing Prayer

Living Christ, so many different people reached out to you in times of desperation with so many different needs. Yet you had compassion for them all. Lord Jesus, we know both struggle and joy in our lives, too.

This day we set before you our many different hopes and concerns.

Fill us with your compassion as we pray.

For all that we are and all that we do, all we wish we could do and all we long for...

We pray for everything we work for in our church and community, and everything we hope for in the face of so much change...

We pray for the choices we face in our country and community, in our homes and workplaces, and for all the responsibilities we bear in our different roles...

We pray for the troubles that weary us, the situations that puzzle us and the uncertainty that surrounds us...

We remember before you each situation that worries us and each person we care about...

Living Christ, you are the Source of peace and new possibility for us all.

Help us trust in your grace for today and tomorrow. Fill us with the strength and hope we need to walk with you, united in your love.

For it is as your faithful followers we dare to pray the words you taught us:

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Lord's Prayer

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.

Invitation to make an offering

We place our hope and trust in God's loving kindness, leaning on God for all our needs. In order to praise God with more than mere words, we offer gifts to support Christ's mission in the world.

If you would like to make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information.

Hymn

Great is thy faithfulness

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1. Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not; thy compassions, they fail not;
as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

Refrain

*Great is thy faithfulness;
great is thy faithfulness;
morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed thy hand hath provided;
great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.*

2. Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in eloquent witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Refrain

3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Refrain

"Great is thy faithfulness," words by Thomas O. Christolm
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Benediction

As you go from this time of worship, remember this:
God's gifts and God's call can never be taken away—
they can never be cancelled or rescinded.

They are irrevocably yours.

So go with confidence and joy to serve God and one another.

And may the blessing of God—
Father, Son and Holy Spirit—
be among you and within you
wherever you find yourselves this week.

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