

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> - Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - June 20, 2021

Words of Welcome

Have you ever been at odds with someone you really care about? A parent or sibling that you love dearly, maybe a close friend? The Apostle Paul certainly knew the frustration, the hurt, the sorrow of relationships that were going through hazardous terrain. He also knew the grace of God had the power to restore relationships.

We continue this week in looking at 2nd Corinthians where Paul writes to those he loved, but things were not going smoothly. We begin with a call to worship.

Call to Worship

Though others may forget us,

God remembers us in every moment.

Though we may seem worthless to some,

We are precious in God's eyes.

Though we may feel hollow,

God pours grace into us.

Though we think our pockets are empty,

God gives us more than we ever imagined.

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Hymn

We cannot own the sunlit sky

717

1. We cannot own the sunlit sky,
the moon, the wild-flowers growing,
for we are part of all that is
within life's river flowing.
With open hands receive and share
the gifts of God's creation,
that all may have abundant life
in every earthly nation.

2. When bodies shiver in the night,
and, weary, wait for morning,
when children have no bread but tears,
and war horns sound their warning,
God calls humanity to wake,
to join in common labour,
that all may have abundant life
in oneness with their neighbour.

3. God calls humanity to join
as partners in creating a future
free from want or fear,
life's goodness celebrating.
That new world beckons from afar,
invites our shared endeavour,
that all may have abundant life
and peace endure forever.

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Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Holy and gracious God, source of life and love,
we gather in your presence to wonder at the beauty and complexity of all you have made, acknowledging how small and insignificant we are, each on our own.
Yet you love us with a promise that gives us significance,
and restores our purpose in the midst of the creation you love.
When we are overcome by forces around us, you speak words of peace.
When trouble or sorrow sets in, you give us the strength we need
to persevere in our witness to your love.

In this time of worship, O God,
we remember all you have been, all you are and all you will be;
offering you all praise and honour, love and loyalty,
with our lips and with our lives to the end of our days.

**Merciful and Mighty God, source of hope and wholeness,
We confess that we fail you far too often.
You call us to serve in the footsteps of Jesus,
but we look to our own interests first.
You call us to love our neighbours,
but we are so good at finding fault in others and withholding our love.
You call us to do justice and care for the vulnerable,
but we prefer to be silent rather than take a stand for those at risk.
Forgive us.
Open wide our hearts to our neighbours in need,
as we put our trust in your mercy—for us and for them.**

God of wisdom and wonder, send us your Holy Spirit to guide us as we listen for your Word. Teach us through what we hear and inspire us to act with the courage and compassion we meet in Jesus Christ, your Living Word. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

“Do not accept the grace of God in vain, for God has said:
At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
And on a day of salvation I have helped you.”
Hear the Good News, in Christ Jesus your sins have been forgiven.
Forgive one another and live with hearts wide open.

Scripture Reading 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

¹¹We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Open Wide Your Heart

The 2nd letter to the Corinthians is a very personal letter from Paul to the Christian community in Corinth. Paul had established this church on a visit to the area. The people had received his message of the saving grace of Jesus Christ and had flourished, but at some point a number of people began to doubt his leadership and knowledge. They questioned whether Paul was right or if some other teachers they had been introduced to were more correct in their thinking. There had been quarreling and dissension in the group over many things, most of which are covered in the 1st letter to the Corinthians.

In the letter our scripture is taken from today, Paul shares experiences that are not written about in any of his other letters in the New Testament or in the Book of Acts. He shares his sorrow and his triumphs, which would come off as boasting if it were not for his deep love for the people who make up this community of faith.

Paul has been building up to this moment in the letter by talking about how fragile we are – people who are treasure in clay jars. People that God uses to heal the world, to bring the Gospel of Christ to others, even though we can break, shatter, or lose our integrity, just like a clay pot. Paul also speaks about the ministry that followers of Christ have been given, a ministry of reconciliation, “in that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us.” (2nd Cor. 5:19-20)

Paul shares all this before he gets to his point – he and others are not seeing eye to eye. He feels that he is not being extended grace and his character is under attack. He also doesn't feel he deserve this. Paul talks about all that he has endured, the hardships they

have gone through in working as servants of God. His list includes words like calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labour, sleepless nights, and hunger.

He also shares the attitude with which he and his companions have faced those challenges...patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Paul is hurting and he desires to be in right relationship with those he loves. Those he has invested in, but even more so to ensure that they are in right relationship with God and one another.

All this got me to thinking about how many times we find ourselves in conflict with others that we really care about. My family has experienced hurt and brokenness, my husband's family has breaks in relationships. I have had friendships that didn't stand the test of time and those that have weathered difficult moments and are stronger for it.

When I think of how things have been resolved or how I and others have moved beyond the hurt it has always been because those involved chose courage, vulnerability, and above all grace in order to find a way forward – to reconcile.

Now to reconcile does not mean to go back to the way things were before. Life doesn't work that way. To reconcile means to move forward into a new future together. And I know I say this often, but not every relationship needs to be reconciled to the point of accepting someone's abuse, emotional, physical, or mental. There is a place for safety. However, you may find that you are able to reconcile the situation, recognizing your own vulnerability and that of another.

Not easy stuff. I still struggle with the emotions that go with the sexual molestation I experienced as a young girl. I have no need to become buddy buddy with the people responsible, but I have been able to reconcile that I was not to blame and that others were not whole enough people to know that what they were doing was wrong in everyway.

Yet for many other relationships there is a new way forward, a way of coming to understand what was going on, the ways in which opinions were formed, conclusions determined, and harm happened. There is a place for reconciling differences of opinion, of understanding, and changing our minds, or agreeing that we don't need to agree on everything to value each other.

I think of how polarized our world has become. Cancel culture with its lack of grace, where people are demonized and criticized because they did something and are not given the grace to change or even for people to recognize there has been change.

Recently the Presbyterian Church in Canada held its General Assembly where representatives from the church across the nation come together to celebrate, learn, and make decisions for the future. Likely the biggest moment in the days of debate, presentations, and conversations that first week of June was when the General

Assembly agreed that LGBTQI people (whether married or single) can be ordained and are welcome to serve as ministers and ruling elders. The other closely related decision was to make changes to our theology and practice regarding marriage, permitting people to choose to define marriage as either a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or a covenant relationship between two adult people.

I share this for a few reasons, one is just to inform the church of the decisions made, but also because this has been a major point of struggle between people who are all from the same Christian denomination. Similar to Paul, it was the struggle between himself and those with whom he maintained a Christian understanding that there was strife. For the PCC there has been hurt and harm particularly felt by those who identify as Christian, a member of the church, and also as LGBTQI+. This decision brought some amount of reconciliation for them. Sadly, at the same time this is a challenge for those who see this as a move away from the understanding of scripture they have held to tightly for decades.

I also share this news as I realized how much my own attitudes and understandings have changed as there was a time that I too held to an understanding that marriage could only be between a man and a woman and that ordination belonged only to those who would be considered heterosexual. Over many years I have come to a different place where I welcome and rejoice over this change in the church. In this I also recognize how I had a part in the harm that was done to people who love God as much as I do and longed to serve God as I now do.

Reconciliation in the church is important. I have spoken to one example of the need for reconciliation in the church nationally, but hitting closer to home for me is the strife experienced in local congregations, where members cause harm to each other. It has been known to happen over the colour of the doors or the way a minister is dressed. It can be that someone disapproves of the point the minister was making in a sermon or how money was used for mission or projects. I have been given grief over giving “bus fare” to those in need who knew that asking for bus fare was a way of getting money for other needs or wants. Those momentary interactions give me a connection to the person and an opportunity to let them know they are valuable and seen.

There are people whose quarrels in the church have brought division and harm. People who sit on different sides of the church because of words spoken with the intent to pierce the other.

Paul understood all of this, experienced all of this as witnessed by his words in this scripture. The church is not filled with perfect people but with sinners, people who hopefully have an awareness that they are imperfect but loved by God. This does not dismiss harm, but rather should spur us on to reconciliation and this because of God’s love for us as demonstrated by the gift of Christ to the world. Remember, we have this ministry of reconciliation. It starts in our homes, must happen in our church, and moves out into our work places, our residences, our schools, and our communities.

Verses 1-13 are book-ended with two pieces that are necessary for reconciliation. First is that we are “not to accept the grace of God in vain.” God’s grace has been poured out through Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is given so that we might know grace and extend it to others. God’s grace is powerful and sustaining.

The passage ends with a plea to open wide your heart. Open wide your heart to receive God’s grace, and open wide your heart to receive the love and affection of others. When we experience God’s grace and choose to open wide our hearts healing can begin, wholeness can be experienced, reconciliation – a new way forward into a future together can happen.

Today may you find it in your heart to do the work of reconciliation whether in your home, church, or community. We have this ministry, we have the grace of God, and we come with hearts wide open. May the peace and grace of God go with you. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God in whom we live and move and have our being:
As we consider the world around us in your presence today,
we are grateful to know you are near,
and that your presence will not fail us, no matter the challenges we face.
We are aware of so many challenges—in our own lives,
the lives of those we care about, and in the world around us.
We wonder how you will reveal yourself, your mercy and your love,
in response to so many different needs.
Help us trust that you never give up on situations which we find overwhelming.

In faithful silence, we lay before you the concerns on our hearts this day:
We pray for those who have been in the headlines this week,
for those situations which concern us deeply,
and for all whose lives cry out to you for help in situations we can’t even imagine:
God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who are suffering from illness of any sort, coping with pain
or with ongoing treatment,
for those waiting for or recovering from surgery,
for those who are bereaved or burdened by some significant loss,
and those struggling with economic hardship in these uncertain times.

We pray for those who are waiting for something significant—
a birth or a death, a trip, a visit, a phone call on Father’s Day,
a move, a new job or the moment of retirement.
Grant them patience, O God, in this time of restless waiting:
God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the work of our church and our government in pursuing Truth and Reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Empower this work, O God.

Bless our congregation, its ministries, and the faithful work of all churches in our community. Unite us in our witness to the love of Jesus.

Open the eyes of all our hearts to new possibilities to serve together as we pray together the words Christ taught us:

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

The scriptures teach us of the courage it can take to serve God. Giving takes courage, too. So give to God as you are able, trusting that God will honour your courage and generosity, blessing your gifts with the power of the Holy Spirit.

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There are people from different churches and places following this service. I encourage each of you to present your offering to God this day to your church community.

If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or 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 or to connect with me.

Hymn

We have this ministry

590

1. We have this ministry and we are not discouraged;
it is by God's own power that we may live and serve.
Openly we share God's word, speaking truth as we believe,
praying that the shadowed world may healing light receive.
We have this ministry; O God, receive our living.
2. O Christ, the tree of life, our end and our beginning,
we grow to fullest flower when rooted in your love.
Brothers, sisters, clergy, lay, called to service by your grace,
different cultures, different gifts, the young and old a place.
We have this ministry; O God, receive our giving.

3. The yoke of Christ is ours: the whole world is our parish;
we daily take the cross, the burden and the joy.
Bearing hurts of those we serve, wounded,
bruised and bowed with pain,
Holy Spirit, bread and wine, we die and rise again.
We have this ministry; O God, receive our loving.

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Benediction (*2 Corinthians 6*)

Put obstacles in no one's way,
but rejoice in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness,
holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,
and the power of God.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/2873/worship-elements-june-20-2021>