

AUGUST 30, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Good morning! So good to see everyone this beautiful morning! Thanks to Eric and Kevin for leading in our gathering music...the song “Unity” is an important one to help us focus our attention and remember why we gather to worship God, to be encouraged as we follow Jesus who taught us to live in peace and healing love.

When I was a student at Goshen College I did my study/service time in Costa Rica. One of the things we did there was ride an old, rickety train across the countryside, through farmland and pastures, across beautiful gorges and waterfalls, beside small towns and through some thick jungle. Costa Rica is rich with varied landscape and terrain, so we saw all sorts of things. As we went through the jungle we saw sloths, hanging from the trees, just... hanging. The train was old and it didn't go fast, but it went faster than the sloths. We never really got to see them move because even though we were going very slowly we were still going much faster than they moved. When I saw that sloth and diligence were paired as the sin and virtue that Caleb would be preaching on today it reminded me of those creatures. Caleb – I'm sure you'll have something challenging for us to consider again today as we continue through this series.

Please join in the Call to Worship as it's printed on your order of service:

The God who created our universe, who acts through history to save our world, who reveals God's love through Jesus and through ongoing intervention in our lives, calls us to the holy task of partnership in building God's kingdom

Come, let us draw near in worship. Let us be energized by our incredible calling!

Let's pray. God, we acknowledge your presence here with us, and we thank you for it. We thank you for your calling to us and we pray that we would be attentive to it. Bless this time of worship. Send your Spirit to each heart, mind and soul – fill us with your love. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Gracious God, we thank you for the many ways we can know your love for us – through our families and friends, through the ways this church offers support and care for one another, through the ways we can see and feel the movement of your Spirit in our lives.

We pray for Emily Flaming and her family as she confesses her faith in Jesus and will be baptized this evening at Grace Community. We pray for your on-going direction in their lives as they seek to be faithful, even as we acknowledge sadness at their departure from Alexanderwohl.

We pray for teachers, students and their families as they head back to school here in Goessel this week and for all others who've already returned or will return very soon. God, we pray for continued wisdom and clear answers about how to keep as many people as possible safe through this covid crisis.

We want to be healthy and we want our environment and our planet to be healthy. We want to be attentive to the care of the earth, Lord, as we make decisions at the personal level and together, as a community and a church. We want to be good stewards.

God, we pray your mercy and comfort on those who've lost homes, possessions and perhaps their courage to Hurricane Laura in the Gulf Coast. We pray also for the losses sustained in California due to the fires. We grieve the loss of life and well-being – of people and of nature. We pray for healing, for the will to make changes that will preserve and sustain life.

We pray for those who are suffering and grieving because of the violence of oppression and racism. God, we ask for your Spirit to be near the friends and families of Jacob Blake, Trayford Pellerin and Damien Daniels. Be present with your Light where there is so much anger and frustration because of injustice, intolerance and insensitivity between peoples. Be the guide, show the way, open hearts and minds to follow and to see how to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly.

We pray for Susan Voth and her family as they grieve the death of her sister, Mary. We are grateful, God, that Susan was able to be in Denver with some of her children this week. We are grateful for her lifetime of faithfulness to you. Be a very present help to her and to Irvin.

God of love and healing, we pray for Lee and Di Suderman in the coming days and weeks as they travel, we ask for safety. As Lee undergoes more testing and consultations with doctors at Mayo, we ask for calm and wisdom. As decisions will need to be made about risky treatments – Lord, we know that none of the options for Lee will be easy – we ask for discernment, courage and faith. May they rest in your love and care.

And now, God, we pray your continued blessings on the rest of this time of worship. May each one here be granted what they need to fill and sustain their spirit. Amen.

SLOTH

Sloth like last week's gluttony is a word we don't use too much anymore. It might just as likely make you think of the animal sloths that climb from tree limb to tree limb, and miraculously seem to survive even though they are incredibly slow.

In fact, the English word "sloth" is related to "slow" just like "growth" and "grow" or "truth" and "true." You probably associate the word with "laziness," but if you listen in, we're talking about something much beyond just being lazy.

The fourth century monk Evagrius Ponticus listed 8 "bad thoughts" that lead to spiritual problems. Maybe "bad thought" will be a more helpful way of thinking about "sloth" rather than "sin," since sloth is not an action that you wrongfully commit, so much as a failure based on our patterns of thinking to act for good.

This monk wasn't the first to identify "bad thoughts." When Jesus and his disciples were criticized for eating with unwashed hands, Jesus pointed out that true "uncleanness" comes from the "bad thoughts" that lie in the heart (Mark 7). Jesus recognized that our inner life impacts our relationships with God and with others.

In reality, the "sloth" of the list of seven deadly sins combines two different "bad thoughts" from the monk Evagrius' list: despondency and acedia.

Now I'm throwing another word at you – acedia – as if sloth weren't enough. Brad Roth in the book *God's Country* defines acedia as “a kind of spiritual despair – a lack of care for life, others, God, or even ourselves.”

The simplest definition of acedia is a “lack of caring.” Think of it as approaching a challenge in life with an attitude of “I don't care,” “not my problem,” “it's all pointless and meaningless.” Acedia is undoing the ties of love that bind us together.

For Brad Roth, acedia is particularly a risk in rural communities, where “we can sometimes feel as if everything we do is so small, as if it doesn't matter.”

In the story of Jesus' passion, Pontius Pilate exemplifies acedia or sloth when he washes his hands and absolves himself of responsibility for Jesus' death.

Let's turn to that story now.

According to Matthew's Gospel, the governor Pilate knows that leaders handed Jesus over out of jealousy. He starts out by giving the assembled crowd a choice.

Since it is customary to release one prisoner, Pilate gives the crowd a choice between the notorious criminal Jesus Barabbas and Jesus called the Messiah.

I have to imagine Pilate thought the choice would be easy. Barabbas was an insurrectionist. Surely the Jewish leaders would value “law and order” and wouldn't want him to go free.

It's Pilate's first attempt to let himself off the hook.

That's when Pilate's wife comes with a message asking him to not have anything to do with “that righteous man” – Jesus – because she had felt distress about him in a dream.

So Pilate tries again by giving the crowd the false choice to either release Barabbas or Jesus. His plan to passively save Jesus' life fails, because the leaders have already persuaded the crowd to opt for Barabbas (woops!).

“What shall I do with this Jesus? What evil has he done?” Pilate asks, as if they are supposed to be doing his job.

“Crucify him!” is all that they will say, as the crowd quickly turns into a mob and Pilate fears a riot.

So Pilate washes his hands of the affair. He declares himself innocent. I find these lines very important because they clearly connect to verse 4 earlier in the chapter.

Earlier, the betrayer Judas Iscariot tried to return his payment of 30 pieces of silver. He tells the priests and elders, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!”

The priests and elders respond to Judas, “what's that to us? *You'll see to it!*” In other words, it's your problem, not ours!

Matthew clearly wants us to link Judas' exchange with the leaders and Pilate's, because Pilate uses the same word "innocent" declaring himself "innocent," and he then gives the priest and elders the same retort they gave to Judas: "you'll see to it!" It's your problem not mine! (verse 27)

It's fascinating that first the leaders try to pass responsibility off to Judas, and then Pilate tries to pass off responsibility to them!

The crowd actually accepts that responsibility in the next verse ("his blood be on us...") – a verse that has tragically been read to justify Christian anti-Semitism.

A song we sang in worship in in the church plant I served Ecuador did not let Pilate off the hook: "that imperialist and soulless Roman who thought he could erase the mistake by washing his hands."

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus' death was not the end of the story. Jesus' resurrection not only was a reversal of that terrible violence, but gives us a power to live creatively in this crazy world without needing to respond with violence.

In the book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, theologian James Cone sees the parallels between the crucifixion of Jesus and the 3500 lynchings of African Americans that happened on US soil.

A lynching is an extra-judicial mob killing. Yet in both the case of many lynchings in the US and the execution of Jesus, the state was involved and supported the tragic killings.

For example, 65 years ago this past Friday, a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till was kidnapped, brutally tortured, and murdered simply for whistling at a white woman. The jury trial completely acquitted all involved, with questionable testimony that Till had done more than whistle.

Till's murder helped spark the Civil Rights movements. Rosa Parks recalled that Till's murder came to her mind motivating her to refuse to move a segregated black seat on the bus.

Even though racism has shaped this country and even American Christianity from our country's inception, recent police shootings of George Floyd and the shooting that left Jacob Blake paralyzed all are bringing this issue to the forefront for many Christians.

What are we called to do? Are we called in the white church to do anything? Or is it "not our problem"? The same question could be asked of any number of challenges in our broken world.

I give racism as an example of a challenge we might not want to take responsibility for. Acedia can affect how we think or behave on any number of challenges. It may look differently for each person.

I've pondered whether this is a temptation for me. A few years ago, I read *Acedia and Me*, by Kathleen Norris. The author candidly reflects on her own temptation to acedia in the midst of the struggles and losses of her life.

I began intrigued but thinking acedia is not a temptation for me. Further reflection began to challenge that. I'm human after all.

Kathleen Norris has one paragraph that is especially convicting: *"Yet often the tasks I don't particularly want to turn out to be the ones I most need to perform. One test to determine whether I am receiving a call from God or from my ego is to ask whether this is something I would rather not do, or feel incapable of doing well. If either is the case, my best course may be to set my feelings aside and try to do the job."*

Last week, I noted that feeling shame is never a good motivation for change. Shame says that I am worthless, no good. I'm a "bad person." In contrast, guilt is remorse for something I've done or failed to do. Guilt may not be pleasant, but there is such a thing as healthy and God-given guilt to motivate us to act, in response to the grace of God that we find in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

After a song of confession, I will lead us in a simple practice to listen for God's voice calling us out of apathy and sloth.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

- Sit in silence for 3 minutes
- Center your mind by listening to your own breathing, the wind, or sounds of nature
- Rest in an awareness of God's love. Before doing anything, you are already God's child. This is your bedrock of worthiness.
- As time passes, ask God: "Who are you calling me to be? Or what are you calling me to do?"
- You may find an answer within you, or you may hear no answer... That's OK, you can repeat this anytime, for any length of time.

[Prayer of confession and words of assurance]

DILIGENCE

The virtue given as a contrast to sloth is diligence. In a farming community, like this one, most of you don't have to be told to work hard.

If you grew up doing farm chores, you were taught diligence from an early age. Our goal is not just a diligence that keeps one busy and "productive."

Our goal is a spiritual diligence, to allow the love and redemptive work of God to flow through us.

Micah 6:8 has words that most of you have heard before. I attended Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, where this verse was somehow attached to the school motto. I felt like I heard about “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God” ad nauseum.

The prophet seeks to answer the question: “how can we please God?” This was an urgent question from the perspective of the people of Israel humiliated by defeat by enemies.

The prophet lists a number of possible sacrifices:

Perhaps burnt offerings of year-old calves? No doubt some of you know much better than me what a year-old calf is worth. A burnt offering was an offering that was burned to the crisp, offered entirely to God rather than ritually eaten by the priests.

But then we move on to offering thousands of rams or thousands of rivers of oil – ridiculous sums out of reach for any single person.

Finally, what about offering your firstborn child? (I know, the Bible doesn’t make for light conversation topics, does it?)

Human sacrifice was unthinkable in Israel, but was part of other neighboring religions, and probably practiced historically by Israelites. The story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac before stopping Abraham is the prime example in Israel’s tradition.

The question is this: what level of sacrifice could we offer that would be so great, God would be moved to accept us? Clearly nothing I could reasonably give would be enough.

In any intentional relationship such as marriage, we learn that just doing something costly for the other doesn’t in of itself make the other person feel loved unless it touches on their true desires.

Verse 8 answers the question of what God truly desires from us.

It’s not about appeasing God with any ritual sacrifice. What God truly expects is simple and still difficult:

Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

I’ll take a moment to define each of these.

First justice is not an abstract concept. It is a concrete action taken to right a wrong. This was the expectation of the biblical judges. As an example, Jesus told the story of a widow in a vulnerable who pleaded with a judge to grant her what she needed. The judge was reluctant, but eventually gave in.

Biblical justice is tied as much to relationships as much as it is to “being fair.” For some reason, a story my dad told me sticks in my mind.

I believe the situation was that he had given hay to a local farmer and was never paid for the hay. Dad gathered that there probably wasn't money to pay; this was more than forgetfulness.

He felt he didn't truly need the money so he dropped it, and never brought it up when he saw the guy.

"Loving mercy" or "loving kindness" comes next. This is love just like Deuteronomy 6 tells us to *love* God with all your heart, soul, and strength.

The mercy or kindness of the equation is much deeper than the English makes it sound. This is the word the Bible uses to describe God's covenant faithfulness with Israel. No matter how often this stubborn people disobeyed, God stayed in relationship and worked to redeem each breach of covenant.

Walking humbly (or carefully) with God means to make God our constant life companion. It means making connection with God the integral part of all that we do.

We are in a moment that feels like *unraveling* in our country, and to different degrees we feel *unraveling* at a personal level.

Whether it's the pandemic or the stark inequalities that the pandemic forcefully brings to light. Some of you are directly affected by a lost job or the poor farm economy.

Even more, we are encouraged to stay home and quarantine, so it can seem all the more like we just hunker down and don't do anything. But that's not true. This is not the time to think we do nothing.

As a church Covid-19 presents a special challenge – how to find a way to both creatively do church without "shutting down." What does sloth versus diligence look like in responding to the pandemic? We have taken an approach that is perhaps more cautious than some businesses or other entities. We are not dependent on a church building to be a church. We have the privilege and opportunity to both continue to be a church, even with some new patterns, while also doing all we can to protect the most vulnerable as our call to love our neighbor. Some entities face more of a dilemma of needing to risk spreading the virus in order to stay in business than we do. I believe we can embrace an opportunity to be counter-cultural in protecting one another. There isn't one right way to do this, and we always appreciate your input.

I'm reminded of some simple lines from the *Lord of the Rings* where the hobbit Frodo complains, *"wish it need not have happened in my time."*

Gandalf the wizard responds, *"So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*

There's wisdom there, even if it's an unlikely source.

So what *to do*? I'm not sure it's about doing something "significant" but about embracing the simple things we know we can do in our lives already and branching out from there. These are not so much action steps as some thoughts to get us started.

- Identify an endeavor that is close to your heart. This might be what you have to work at, even if it feels too large, or not significant enough. Believe that it matters.
- Ground yourself in your own worth. You matter. Your life matters. What you do matters. Through prayer, relationships, or whatever will help you remember your sense of worth, lay the foundation that you are already God's beloved before you get started, neither more nor less than anyone else. This is different than the way that the world defines worth, which is always in competition with others. Racism itself is rooted in a system that presumed the elite and slave-owning class were worth the most. Then it played on the resentment and fear of poor whites to give them the change to feel better than African Americans. Any message we tell ourselves that begins with the phrase: "well, at least I'm not a..." is deadly. Sloth takes hold both when we see ourselves as above a particular task and when we see ourselves as too small to do anything.
- Be OK with not being finished. Part of taking responsibility rather than passing off responsibility means living in the tension of knowing the work is not done, because there is too much to do. This is particularly true of the work of undoing racism.

In conclusion, the three thoughts were: identify what is close to your heart, find ways to remember your own worth and significance, and learn to be OK with not being "finished."

May God give us diligence, wisdom, and joy.