

FEBRUARY 28, 2021

WELCOME

Welcome to our Sunday morning worship at Alexanderwohl, on this beautiful morning amid some of the first signs of spring!

We continue to meet for worship in more than one way – some of you present here in the sanctuary and others present through Zoom.

As always, we'd like to see those of you watching on Zoom, and maybe the sanctuary camera will give an idea of who is here.

Most of all, as people gathered in the name of Jesus, we want to remember that we gather in the presence of Christ, even when we are not all physically in the same place.

We want to be fully present to one another and to the presence of Christ that is already here.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Today is the second Sunday of Lent, and as we journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem, we light one less candle each week.

If you have your bulletins, join me in this prayer asking for the Christ's call to follow to be made clear for this moment:

L: Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives:

P: Give us discernment L: to hear your word.

P: Give us grace L: to relinquish our tasks.

P: Give us courage

L: to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead;
so that the voice of the gospel

All: may reach the ends of the earth. Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Loving and generous God, we thank you for your many good gifts to us, for the ways we know your presence with us and your love for us. We thank you for your insistent call in our lives; be with us this morning as we focus on paying attention to that call and how it plays out in the choices and decisions we make. Open our hearts to your Spirit as we try to listen and see and think and speak and move in ways that reflect Jesus and his ways. Give us your wisdom and courage.

We're grateful for the warmer temperatures and the bit of moisture that has come in the last couple of weeks. We thank you for the impending springtime as we look forward to growth, blooms, seeds planted that will bring grain and fruit. In this Lenten season we're grateful for

time to reflect on your grace and your love for humanity, God. Thank you for the sacrificial love that Jesus showed in his life, his teachings, his death and the hope that we have in his resurrection. Let us not lose sight of that grace, love and hope in these days.

God, we thank you for ways you've created us to heal – from injuries, from surgery, from brokenness of various kinds. We thank you for successful surgery for Donley and we pray for his continued healing. We pray for others who are healing, from physical injuries, or disease, from emotional wounds, we pray for those who are healing from trauma or grief.

O God, here we are a people, a nation, a planet at prayer. Attune our spirits that we may sing together your songs of peace. Here we are, a militarized planet. Transform our fears that we may convert our missiles into messengers of peace. Here we are, God, a polluted planet. Purify our vision that we may cleanse the land, the waters, and the life-giving air. Here we are, an exploited planet. Heal our hearts that all would have an abundance of daily bread.

God, we bring our prayers of lament. And we light these candles as a sign of our sadness. Our hearts are heavy as we try to grasp the reality of more than half a million, 500,000 lives lost to covid-19 in our country and 2.5 million in the world. We lament the social isolation and the economic devastation faced by so many. We lament the inequality of resources and the division at so many levels laid bare and made obvious by this pandemic. In these moments of silence, we offer you our prayers of lament... We think of those from our own church family that have died already this year: Alda Mae Hiebert, Ervin Goossen, Frances Ratzlaff Rogers, Ira Don Schroeder, Don Hiebert, Irvin Voth, Norman Schmidt, Willard and Julia Regier, Milferd Schmidt, Leon Nikkel. Be with the loved ones of each of these people; grant them comfort.

Lord God, we pray for mercy, we pray that people would find and create meaningful ways of mourning together, to feel one another's losses at a depth that motivates us to help one another heal. May followers of Jesus here and around the world offer healing and hope in his name. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Holy One, as you are faithful to us, may we be faithful to you; faithful with our time and energy, faithful with our possessions and wealth. Receive these gifts by your grace. Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit to make real your reign of love, justice, and peace in our world. Amen.

UPSIDE DOWN MISSION – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 10:1-16

All of us have had the experience of entering something unprepared. Once you've begun, it doesn't help to wish you had prepared differently. It is sink or swim. You do the best you can.

When my dad started out on his own, it was as a diesel mechanic. My grandpa helped build the shop so that he could get started, and he went to a vocational school for the mechanic knowledge. Some business classes might have been nice, as this challenge was about much more than mechanic know-how. It took some trial and error to learn how to actually turn a profit as a business.

In the Gospel story, Jesus sends out 70 followers on a mission with limited provisions. It seems as if Jesus is sending them unprepared. Maybe they felt unprepared. A chapter prior, Jesus had done the same thing with the twelve apostles, so maybe there is method to the madness. It is not true that they are truly unprepared. Jesus gave them a commissioning and specific instructions. They are to go ahead of Jesus into the towns and villages where Jesus intended to go.

In ch. 9:51, “when the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Jesus is resolute about the direction he is heading. We all know what happened in Jerusalem. This means the 70 are sent in the direction of Jerusalem ahead of Jesus. The passage just prior to this is about tough discipleship, no extended good-byes or looking back.

Your Bible might say 72 rather than 70. Existing ancient manuscripts are about evenly divided on that. Actually, this discrepancy makes the meaning of the number a little clearer. The number of the nations in Genesis is given as 70 in Hebrew, but 72 in the Greek translation.

The likely symbolism of the number is to foreshadow how the good news of Jesus will come to all the nations of the earth.

As Jesus commissions the 70, he uses two metaphors.

There’s a harvest metaphor. You all know how urgent harvest can feel even with combines. You don’t waste time, and you look anxiously at the weather forecast hoping to finish harvest in good time.

Jesus’ day was similar to the days this community remembers in the old black and white photos. You know, many workers including women and children cutting wheat, gathering it into shocks, threshing by with a threshing stone.

The more hands, the merrier, so of course, you’ll ask the “lord of the harvest” to send some more workers.

Jesus tells the 70 disciples that they are like harvesters with an urgent task. Jesus also tells them they will be like lambs among wolves. This is the second metaphor. What does that mean?

You might remember Isaiah’s prophecy of the wolf lying down with the lamb in the future age. But of course, we know what wolves do to lambs ordinarily.

Jesus is sending his followers, not unprepared, but vulnerably. There will be dangers along the way. They will go in pairs with minimal provisions: No money bag or luggage. They will walk barefoot. They are not to greet anyone on the road in order to lose no time or focus on their mission.

The instructions are different than the one’s Jesus gave to the 12, who were not allowed to take staffs, extra shirts, money, or bread. But the spirit of the instructions is very much the same.

Their purpose is simple: heal the sick, and announce the good news: “the kingdom of God is drawing near to you!”

Since they go with no money or travel provisions, they must find friendly houses who will host them. They must approach potential hosts with the greeting: “Peace to this house!” If there is a “son of peace,” someone who shares the same vision of peace, then their peace rests on the house. If not, their peace returns to the disciples.

If the house welcomes them, they will stay there as guests, receiving lodging and food. It’s like the days when my grandmother or great-aunt would make a big meal to take to all the folks that were helping in the fields.

As for the towns that don’t welcome them, Jesus has striking instructions: Go to a public place and wipe off the dust that clings to your feet. It’s the opposite of graciously receiving their host’s food and shelter. We will refuse even the dust of your place that we’ve inadvertently received.

But the proclamation is still the same: “the kingdom of God is drawing near!” It’s both good news and bad news, depending on who you are.

CHRISTIAN MISSION

A version of the sending out of the 12 is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and Luke also has this account of the expansion of the mission with 70 going out.

The manner in which they are sent is critical to Christian mission, and the stories we have of the apostle Paul’s journeys are not so different.

This is mission that is paradoxically powerless and powerful. It is offering the good news of Jesus without seeking to profit from it, *and* without seeking to win people who think they will profit by accepting.

It seems very different than the way that Christianity ultimately spread to many parts of the world, often traveling to kings, alongside armies and alongside colonizing governments.

Lamin Sanneh, a scholar from Gambia believes that the diverse expressions of global Christianity show that many people nonetheless discovered truly good news – good news that resonated with their earlier experiences of God, whether they discovered it because of Western missionaries, or often, in spite of Western missionaries.¹

Vulnerable mission requires that those who are sent trust not in their own power, but the power of the Spirit. Vulnerable mission means they had to deal with their own fear.

Howard Thurman wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited* in 1949, a short book that inspired Martin Luther King. Thurman wrote about people who are victims of oppression or racism in these words:

*A man's conviction that he is God's child automatically tends to shift the basis of his relationship with all his fellows. He recognizes at once that to **fear** a man, whatever may be that man's*

¹ Sanneh, Lamin. *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West*, p. 74-75

*power over him, is a basic denial of the integrity of his very life. It lifts that mere man to a place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone.*²

Thurman's words apply well to the situation of the disciples of Jesus who went on a mission. They were disinherited folks who learned to fear no one because of their relationship to God. They were socially powerless people who went with the power of the Spirit.

MISSION AS GUESTS

Last week, I mentioned the virtual seminar through Hesston College that included the theologian David Fitch as a guest speaker. While it's hard to go in depth here, those of us who attended have yet to process what we've learned.

Fitch emphasized that in our unprecedented times, the church may need a reset, but focusing on core practices that "gather us into Jesus' lordship" and help us be present to God and to each other.

Fitch named three places where we need to cultivate an awareness of Christ's presence. The first of these places is in our corporate worship.

The second is home to home, as we share life together. During Covid, this may as well be phone call to phone call, or Zoom gathering to Zoom gathering.

The third is in the neighborhood where we are *guests*. Where we come to serve, but without being the ones with the power.

ALEXANDERWOHL

So I now what us to consider how our gospel story applies to Alexanderwohl. Is it just a story about what happened way back then? I know you all love me, but I think I'd run into a brick wall if I tried to convince you all to go out to Hesston, Newton, Hillsboro, and Salina, walking barefoot with no cash, hoping to find houses that will host you without calling the police.

Maybe our context and time are different, but are there principles in this story that apply to the ongoing mission of the church? The principle that grips my imagination, especially in light of the people I quoted, is this idea of vulnerability and going as *guests*.

What would it mean for us to become as guests in our community and places? Even that is pretty upside-down. Why do I say that?

Because Alexanderwohl is the mother church. Goessel is on the map specifically because of this congregation who settled here. If anything, you are the hosts. This is the community you started. Folks who belong to other churches or who have moved to more recently to the community, who have non-Mennonite last names – they are the guests.

Some fit this culture, the strong work ethic and rural way of life that has been a part of this community, and others not so much. Clearly both those of Mennonite background as well as

² Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 51

those who aren't have shaped the community and especially the shared life of school and school events.

With the many changes, it certainly still seems like we are "hosts," though it is no longer true that Alexanderwohl owns the community. We expect people to come to us, come to church or midweek. We expect to be the helpers when folks need help.

Can we at least engage in the thought experiment of flipping this around? What if we imagined being guests in the community, or whatever spaces where we live, go to school, or spend time in? Is that even possible? You might say that's an intriguing idea, and this is a good Bible story to retell, but it just really doesn't apply here, except for the folks who left home to do work overseas.

That's fine, but I wanted to raise this idea, this principle of doing mission as *guests*. One way to start is by reminding ourselves that the Spirit of Christ is always ahead of us, already present.

There was a time in High School when I felt like I needed to start "spiritual conversations" with peers. I have a specific memory of meeting my friend Austin for summer training at the school for the upcoming cross-country season.

Austin had this 80s model Datsun with a hood entirely rusted, affectionately called "the bomb."

We talked about whatever we talked about -- running, school, sports, movies. My head was spinning trying to figure out how I could somehow turn the conversation into one about God. It didn't help that I was an introvert, unassertive, and words never flowed for me.

I went home feeling like a failure. I couldn't do it. We just talked about "worldly" things and I couldn't get the conversation switched to God. The fact that Austin's family were part of a church didn't help with feeling I failed to be a "spiritual influence" on this friend.

Maybe we don't need to have such a strong agenda. We start with being aware of the presence of Christ as we go about our day. As you go to work, school, do errands, while at the game, or chatting with a neighbor on the tractor, or at the dealership, or on the phone.

Breathe this simple prayer: I enter this place in the presence of Christ.

Christ is here; I come as a guest at Christ's table, to serve and to graciously receive the gifts of my neighbors.

May we find the presence of Christ in others and may others see the presence of Christ in us.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Each week during Lent, it is important for us to confess our sin, failure, and fear as we lean into God's forgiveness, mercy, great love, and power.

Let's pray this prayer of confession together, which you can find in your bulletins. There will be a moment for your own silent prayers midway through, and I will follow with words of assurance of God's forgiveness.

L: Holy Spirit, Source of our life, hear our confession and forgive us for fearing change when you call us to new patterns of living,

P: Forgive us

L: For our blindness to your empowering, transforming vision for ourselves, for our hurting neighbors, and for all your creation.

P: Forgive us

L: For working out of our own power, always with plenty of provisions, expecting to be in control, as we pursue our agenda rather than yours

P: Forgive us (silence)

All: We confess that our strength, identity, and unity is Jesus Christ

L: not our political affiliation, not our family ties, not our wealth or education; not our safety from crisis or loss.

All: Christ is our strength, identity, and unity.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

The love of Christ empowers us.

Christ applauds our feeble steps like a mother applauding a toddler's first steps,

Cheers us on and embraces us with loving discipline when we stumble.

God's glorious purposes transform our pain.

Walk confidently on the way that Christ opens for you today. Amen

BENEDICTION (VT 1066)

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands
stretch out your hands to serve.

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open your hearts to love.

May you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet, and may everyone you meet see the face of Christ in you.