

9/5/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

CALL TO WORSHIP – PSALM 46

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God our strength,

Let us be still and know that you are God.

*You are our refuge and fortress,
Christ is our sure foundation.*

You make wars cease and are exalted throughout the world.

Help us open ourselves to your presence.

In our time of worship, help us to find the insight and power through your Spirit in order to follow Jesus in daily life.

Amen

TEACHER DEDICATION

Last time we began our fall quarter of Sunday School, and though we missed doing this last year due to Covid, our practice is to dedicate teachers and students, asking God to work through our faith formation classes.

Teachers and youth sponsors may remain where they are, but I do invite you to stand.

Please consider yourself a teacher not only if you teach children and youth classes, but also if you regularly lead adult SS.

There is also a part for children and youth – it will be marked “K-12” on the screen and will be orange text, so please be watching to join in as well.

There are also parts for all of us together, representing the congregation.

Hopefully most of us can see the screen, acknowledging that there are a few blind spots. If you are in one of those, you can participate by listening!

Leader: God sent Jesus into the world to show us how to live as God’s people

K-12: Who will tell us about Jesus?

Teachers: We will tell you about Jesus! We want to share the story of Jesus so that you may choose to love him and follow his way. As we worship, pray, and share the Bible story, may you be inspired to love Jesus and live like him every day.

All: As we hear and share God’s story together, may our hearts be opened to love Jesus.

Leader: We are all created, known, and loved by God, and each person's faith journey is unique. The Bible offers guidance for this journey, revealing God's work in the world and how to be part of the ongoing story of the people of God.

K-12: Who will guide us on this faith journey?

Teachers: Along with your family and this congregation, we will guide you! We will lead you in prayer, worship, and study that will help you to develop a relationship with God to sustain you throughout life. Faith grows in community. We will learn from each other how to faithfully follow God.

Leader: God's love transforms us so that we can participate in the healing of our community and world.

All: We are thankful for God's transforming power. We will support those who share their gifts of teaching and discipling along all of our stages of life and faith.

Teachers: We will study God's Word together. We will challenge our church to share God's love and peace with all that we meet.

All: May we all grow in faith as we seek God's kingdom together!

CHRISTIANITY AS DISCIPLESHIP – PASTOR CALEB

Matthew 7:24-27, Luke 9:23

My apologies if it feels like we have returned to James, when we were planning to be done. These two short passages are not James, but certainly have parallels: *Be like the wise man who heard Jesus' words and put them into practice. Take up your cross and follow Jesus.*

Before we go further, I'd like to say a few things about this series on Anabaptist Essentials. We often think about the Anabaptists as people that lived in the 16th century, as indeed was true of the first Christians who were called by that name.

Many of you are physical descendants of Anabaptist or Mennonite families going back hundreds of years. But this series will not be a history lesson. It also won't be about our "heritage."

I'm a descendant of Richard Trevithick, through my mom, who was the inventor of the first steam locomotive in 1804. Trevithick worked on a number of projects including a steam-powered self-propelled vehicle that he called the "puffing devil."

Let's suppose I find inspiration in Trevithick. I could attempt to restore the original locomotives that he built, as clearly others have done from pictures. I'm sure it'd be well received at Threshing Days if you could transport it there.

More useful, however, would be to work as an engineer for a modern car or engine, taking inspiration from Trevithick's ingenuity and innovation, but applying it in the present.

My point is that we have much to learn from the early Anabaptists or from past history, but that will not be our focus. Our focus will be on who we are in the present.

Over the next 10 weeks, we will consider 10 faith essentials of *Anabaptist Christian faith*. It's not that these are absent from other Christian streams, but as Palmer Becker says, Christians from the Anabaptist tradition are "uniquely different" in how we emphasize and apply these.

There is some simplifying and distilling going on in describing these ten. There has always been plenty of diversity in the Anabaptist movement, and even more so today among descendant groups. We also often fail to live out what we might say we aspire to.

If you can see the numbers, this is the order in which we will address these "essentials."

This is not about thinking that we are better than other Christians or always right. We have much to learn from other groups, but we first need to know who we are and what we bring to the table.

Becker uses the image of a potluck, with our "uniquely different" dishes a contribution to the spread. Another image that comes to mind is of a quilt with different pieces that might not seem to go together taken by themselves, but when taken up in the whole, something beautiful emerges.

WISE AND FOOLISH MEN

Jesus' parable of the wise man and the foolish man is very familiar. We teach it to our kids.

Just yesterday, our kids watched the VeggieTales version, which is combined with the three little pigs. The straw house and the brick house are foundationless. When the Hover-like dam is breached and the valley is flooded, these houses are swept away. Bob the Tomato fortunately built his wooden house on a solid foundation, where the three little pigs are able to ride out the storm from the comfort of the second story.

The parable of the wise and foolish men is Jesus' conclusion of his famous sermon on the mount. This is also true of the "sermon on the plain" in Luke which also opens with the Beatitudes and closes with the wise and foolish men.

Jesus makes a statement that is encapsulating his teaching. Matthew's version is spare on words and perfectly symmetrical. You have a wise man, who "practices" Jesus' words – his house is built on the rock and it does not fall. The foolish man does not practice Jesus' words. His house is built on sand and it falls.

The hazards each house faces are a word-for-word repetition: "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against" each house.

In the region of Palestine dry summers could lead one to think that a river valley was a safe place to build a house until the torrential rains of the fall hit, bringing mudslides and swelling the river.

We are good at remembering the visual picture of the two houses and the hazards of flooding. Here at Alexanderwohl we also have witnessed first-hand how the ground can shift over time. We've had to lay foundations for rows of cemetery stones, and we had a major project to shore up the foundation of the church building, leading to the creation of the foundation room.

We do less well at remembering what Jesus' is using this parable to illustrate. I had always taken it to be about "believing in" or "trusting" Jesus as the rock.

When I read it through a couple of times, I realized the real lesson: both groups of people "hear Jesus' words." Everyone who "hears Jesus' words and does them" are comparable to the wise man.

Yes, it is about "doing." Of course, this is not doing disconnected from a theology of grace.

Some interpreters notice that Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a series of "Blessed are yous." From the beginning, Jesus seems to presume "you are already people of God."

Matthew present Jesus as a new Moses. The first Moses led the people out of Egypt to the base of Mount Sinai where they received the law to tell them the life-giving way of life they were to have going forward.

Likewise, Jesus is telling those who would follow after him, the life-giving narrow way that he himself has chosen.

The Sermon on the Mount is an important window into how the first Christians viewed their Christianity. The first generation witnessed Jesus healing and restoring the sick and socially excluded, caring for the poor, teaching, challenging prevailing authorities, while loving his enemies.

The New Testament generation believed that at Pentecost they had received the power of the Holy Spirit to continue what Jesus started. According to the Book of Acts, they became known as "People of the Way," as they lived the way of Jesus.

To be like the man who builds his house on the rock was more than just trusting intellectually or emotionally in Jesus. It was building on the foundation of Christ as a transformed people attempting to do as Jesus said, actively live the Jesus way.

Living the way of Jesus is not rigid, legalistic adherence to 2000-year-old rules. Jesus described his way in parable, story, and example. The fact that we live in a different world than his in no way invalidates his teaching, but it does mean we need wisdom and a fair bit of thoughtful and Spirit-led discernment on what to do.

AREAS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

What is Christianity? It's not a simple question, especially after 2000 years of many diverse Christian traditions and groups. Palmer Becker discusses several different frames of reference that different people hang their Christian hat on.

FORGIVENESS

For many Christians, the essence of Christianity is receiving forgiveness for your sins so that you can be saved and hope in a heavenly reward after this life.

For those needing a drastic change in their life and a release from guilt and shame, this is very important. Forgiveness is an essential element for any person's faith.

Some Christians focus almost exclusively on finding God's forgiveness as the point of faith and stop after that step.

God's forgiveness is essential and frees us to forgive others. But forgiveness isn't the goal of faith. Finding and offering forgiveness are necessary steps to be able to embark on the ongoing journey of faith.

BELIEFS

For a great many Christians, Christianity is largely an intellectual or belief system. It is a set of beliefs about God, the world, doctrine, and the "correct" way to read the Bible. American Christianity has been particularly focused on the intellectual side of faith.

- Faith will impact our beliefs -- we have to be open to the reality of God and believe that there really is something to the wisdom, practices, way of life, and imperatives of our tradition.
- But we can't reduce faith to belief. Too many Christians have spent too much time policing beliefs in ways that I don't believe has given good fruit.

We need to be able to think through what we believe and why. Yet unless those beliefs are superficial, they must have an impact in all of life.

In a relationship with a spouse or close friend, saying "I love you" or telling them you care without this taking concrete expression doesn't hold as much water. We prove our love when we make sacrifices to demonstrate it.

The "wise" man of the parable likewise clearly has more than just cognitive intelligence. He isn't dispassionately observing on a screen mapping suitable building locations. He was on the ground, building himself.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

There are other Christians who focus on spiritual experience as the core of faith. This is an important and often underemphasized area in many Anabaptist communities.

"Orthopathy" means right experiencing of connection to God and connection to authentic community. Orthopathy is emphasized by Pentecostal or charismatic Christians. In a different way, an increasing number of people interested in contemplative prayer practices are realizing our faith is shallow unless we open ourselves to deeper experience of God.

For some Christians, worship includes aesthetical elements like architecture, liturgy, art, smells and bells. For Mennonites, music is likely the primary aesthetic and experiential element that is able to move our emotions and spirits.

As many young Christians question the beliefs they were taught, and the institutional church declines in Western countries, there's a thirst for a more experiential faith.

We need experiences of God's presence, of somehow being captured in worship, and felt love and affection for fellow sojourners in our chaotic time.

Even so, Anabaptists would still subordinate and test spiritual experience against the teachings of Jesus and the call to follow Jesus.

MEMBERSHIP IN A GROUP

A fourth dimension is membership in a church or faith group. For many Christians, their “Christian identity” is simply that they belong to a group. In some cases, people think they are Christians because they belong to a “Christian country.”

Some churches emphasize that you belong if you have the right beliefs. For others you belong when you behave. For churches with a long rootedness to a place and family connections like ours, there is a danger in subtly communicating that you belong when you are “from here.”

In any case, following Jesus is not a solitary pursuit. We need community and we need a sense of belonging.

DISCIPLESHIP

Anabaptist Christianity doesn’t reject any of these other dimensions or aspects of faith. But we primarily view Christianity as discipleship – following Jesus.

The early Anabaptists were unique in their day for emphasizing the Sermon on the Mount. They practiced adult baptism, an illegal and costly choice in their day, to signal their intent to follow Jesus.

We may have other loyalties (family, workplace, community, country), but the primary driving force of our lives must be seeking to follow Jesus as best we know how.

There are still some dangers to emphasizing discipleship, though.

We can become judgmental of one another or turn obedience into something that is joyless. We can have conflict over differing interpretations of what it really means to follow Jesus today. As I said earlier, discipleship requires careful discernment.

By the same token, we can maintain a rhetoric of following Jesus, yet unthinkingly conform to the broader culture and the spirit of the age. Since actions speak louder than words, our children and acquaintances may be left to conclude that our shortcomings represent all there is to “following this Jesus.”

When we are “born again,” we are freed to live a new kind of life. We rely on the Holy Spirit to do this, and we must be honest that we will fall short. That doesn’t mean we give up.

CONCLUSION

According to Becker, Anabaptists dare to dream the following ideas are possible to imperfectly live out.

- To follow Jesus radically in our daily lives, with the story of Jesus becoming the central story that informs how we tell our own stories and guide our lives.
- That we can look to the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament as a whole to understand Jesus’ teaching, apply it to our own time in thoughtful ways, and obey.

- That the way of reconciling love is not naïve, but possible to begin both in interpersonal relationships and in our great cultural and violent conflicts, granting that this is not always easy to pursue.
- Another is that it is possible to give primary allegiance to Jesus, making Jesus our most central loyalty. This may seem simple, but in practice most Christians let other unacknowledged loyalties come first.
- We can build a community of fellow followers of Jesus sharing in common this commitment of faith and a commitment to one another.
- And finally, in our affluent culture of high consumption, we can aspire to a counter-cultural simple way of life.

These things taken together are the vision we dream of and aspire to.

RESPONSE TIME

As we go through this series, we are bringing back a time of response, so that we can learn from one another. For this week, I've created some questions for reflection. Palmer Becker's book is a resource, but you all don't have to slavishly adopt either Becker's ideas or my ideas on faith essentials. Better yet is to have a conversation and to find our way together as a congregation.

1. How would you answer the question: what is Christianity? If you had to pick one, which of the areas – beliefs, spiritual experience, forgiveness, salvation, and following Jesus in daily life – do you feel is particularly essential?
2. Is it a reasonable goal to follow Jesus' teaching (such as the Sermon on the Mount) consistently in this life? What teachings of Jesus are primary for you?
3. How would you describe the faith we share in common at Alexanderwohl? How can we disagree in a spirit of love when we do not all see things the same?

BENEDICTION

Diane Karay, Sing the journey 157

Go into the world doing what the Lord requires:
 living with kindness and justice,
 walking your path humbly with God.
 Then you will find yourselves blessed.

Know that yours is the kingdom of heaven
 yours the strength and mercy of God,
 yours all the blessings
 given to God's beloved children.