

2021-10-24 Worship Service

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Loving God, thank you for your good gifts – gifts of creation, of your love and mercy for us and for the world. We are thankful, God, that we have been created in your image – we have been created in your image! So that when we make mistakes, you offer us repentance and forgiveness. There is no mistake that is not forgivable with you. And because of Jesus' sacrificial love, we are also able to live out sacrificial love.

But it's hard sometimes, God. And we need to confess. We confess that sometimes our mistakes are too heavy to carry, too real to hide and too deep to undo. Help us to name what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts cannot bear, and what can become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Give us courage to face what may be separating us from you, so that we can look at it, do what is in our power, with your help, to reconcile it. Grant to us a future in which we can be changed. Grant us the grace to grow in your likeness and image.

O God, in these moments, we offer you our prayers. We offer prayers of gratitude – for health and healing. You have created our bodies with remarkable healing qualities! Thank you, God for the positive news that Steve Banman received this week that the cancer cells are not growing; we celebrate with Steve and pray for his continued well-being. We thank you for others in our midst who have experienced healing. For Judy Unruh as her hip continues to improve, for Gene Hastings who is having good days of feeling better. We pray for those who are not feeling well, who may be sick with Covid-19 or other ailments, physical or emotional. We know that you are the Great Healer, God, the one who longs for our wholeness – in body and in spirit. Thank you for medical and scientific tools that we can use. And thank you, God, for the tools of nature and of spiritual discipline that can bring healing. We know that your Holy Spirit works through all variety of avenues to reach us with your love.

Be with those who work the ground as harvest comes to an end and there can be some rest. Thank you, God, for the beauty of your earth, for the opportunity to steward it well, to plant and tend and harvest.

We pray, God for those who are formal mentors to our students. We ask for your blessing and guidance on the mentors and mentees as they officially begin another year of intentional relationship. Thank you for Sandy and the work she does to help these relationships to form. May your Spirit be present in each one.

We pray for all of our students as they learn and play – sports, music, their academic subjects and as they learn how to live together in a world that seems topsy-turvy right now. Be with our young people as they learn how to navigate in these difficult, polarized times. Grant us adults the deep wisdom and genuine faith to be solid examples for them. Grant all of us your underlying sense of joy – that you are our God and we are your people and in that promise lies our greatest hope. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

GOD SEEKS US THROUGH CHRIST – PASTOR CALEB YODER

2 Cor 5:14-20

When I lived in Honduras, I spent many hours worshipping with the neighborhood church just a block where I lived. It was a Mennonite church, but at times you could have thought you were in a Pentecostal church.

Worship services were often lively and long. It was good to feel a connection with other believers, and I never forgot I was a foreigner, sometimes wondering what I was doing there.

One of the most common verses that the pastor preached from was verse 17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

The Spanish Reina Valera version had this as: “si alguno está en Cristo, nueva criatura es.”

If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a “new creature.” (This is also how it is in the King James Version). For Pastor Porfirio, new creature meant very clearly that any person claiming to be a Christian better shape up. Your life needed to change to reflect your claim to have found Christ.

Sometimes Pastor Porfirio, would point at the congregation with an air of scolding as he’d say the words “new creature.” The message was: “you people sure aren’t acting like you’re new creatures!”

The pastor was right that the apostle Paul is talking about a *transformation* of any person who experiences reconciliation with God. *Transformation* is the word of the day.

And “new creature” is an understandable way to make sense of this strange verse. The most word-for-word translation would be: “*Therefore if anyone in Christ, new creation!*”

That seems to me to be about more than just the individual person. The spare and enigmatic words leave me the impression that if only one person found that spiritual connection with Christ, that would be enough for there to be a whole new creation. A new order is begun right there.

Our passage this morning is about the reconciliation that God is about. There are several things that we can say:

GOD’S RECONCILIATION

One is that reconciliation is God’s initiative. God starts this. This is clear in how the word is used:

“*All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ...*”

“*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...*”

The word is always in the active voice when God is the subject. God reconciles by creating the way for people to come back to God.

Then in verse 20 addresses us with the command: “Be reconciled with God!” Clearly it depends on us to respond to God’s initiative, but the verb is still passive voice. It’s not “reconcile God to yourselves.”

That’s a significant difference. It is we who have gone away and are called to come back like the prodigal son who came to his senses and returned to his father.

It is also interesting to study the word “reconciliation.” In the original language, “reconciliation” is built off of the word “alter,” or “change.”

Reconciliation is a change. A related word describes a married couple who divorces or separates. If they reconcile, they come back together.

Reconciliation is about people in conflict coming back together. When God initiates reconciliation, God acts to resolve the conflict (as God has done through Jesus’ death and resurrection).

What kind of change does this involve for anyone who responds? Palmer Becker describes the *change* of transformation like this: because of humanity’s sin, selfishly choosing our own way, we have created a situation where our thinking, feeling, and acting are all self-centered.

We are about serving ourselves, and our thoughts and emotions are distorted in self-centered ways. We act in ways that hurt others.

The transformation of accepting God’s offer of reconciliation is to allow the Spirit of Christ to live within us, taking the place of our earlier false selves.

In turn, we learn to think like Christ (“let your mindset be that of Christ Jesus” in Phil. 2:5); we develop feelings based on love, mercy, and compassion rather than our feelings coming mostly from our past wounds or sense of entitlement. As our thinking and feeling are transformed – any counselor knows they are closely linked – we begin to act in different ways.

Becker’s diagrams are helpful for depicting the human predicament and a way to conceive of the goal. The goal is not to be servile slaves of another force, but for the Spirit of Christ to live within us, to be “in Christ,” in a way that creates a fuller life of peace within and human flourishing in community.

If we are honest, this might feel too simple. Few of us can point to a singular change where we went from being totally self-centered and immature all the time to suddenly “living by the Spirit” all the time.

It’s a journey, with some relapses along the way, but we don’t experience lasting growth and change without a clear sense of the goal, and a way to communicate it.

Many Christians emphasize salvation or reconciliation as a kind of transaction for each individual. The goal is to get on a list to be able to go to heaven, and in the meantime do your best to stop offending an angry God.

The apostle Paul makes it clear that he has a bigger vision than just a collection of individuals ready to be rescued from a world slated for demolition.

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.”

“There is a new creation! The old has gone, the new is here!”

Reconciliation is about being a part of something so much larger. There is still a lot of brokenness and tragedy around us, that we can become cynical, but we don't move past the cynicism unless we can catch a glimpse of the new thing.

This is exactly what the early Christians did. In the wake of the disappointment of following an apparently failed Messiah (at least from a human point of view), they caught the infectious hope of the resurrection.

For the second half of our time, I want to focus on our response to God's initiative. How are we (those present in person or virtually) involved in this, and how do we live this out and communicate this?

To begin, we cultivate our own relationship with God. The phrase, “having a relationship with God,” can feel cliché, sometimes spoken about in Christian devotionals and radio in a way that doesn't feel true to life. If there's ever a time when you feel you have to choose between having to “fake it” or not talk about your faith at all, it is when we feel the pressure to be able to describe a vivid and easy relationship with God.

I believe that we make this more complicated than we need to. You already have a relationship with God if you have had times of struggle and you lean into God or a reality deeper and beyond yourself. If you lean into God or a reality beyond yourself, when you dig deep for something to allow your life to count beyond living for yourself or just making daily life happen.

Or if you at least find moments of openness to God's presence or attempting to address God in your thoughts or to open yourself to the silence in case you might be attuned to God's voice.

There are disciplined ways to engage practices of reading scripture and praying. The more disciplined we are, the more opportunity we have to notice God's presence, movement, and voice. But don't disqualify yourself just because you haven't found a consistent discipline. God is never far, and so long as you open yourself in at least some instances, you are not far.

Don't approach practices as "merit" or "transaction" based -- I do this, God will do that, or I do this, and I therefore am a better person. Don't play the game of comparing yourself to others. Don't disqualify yourself because of your shortcomings. And don't go about any spiritual practice in a way that is joyless. Wherever and whenever you find greatest joy, God is not far.

God is not done with us.

One of the more confusing verses in this section is this: *“one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”*

What is this really referring to?

The apostle Paul frequently uses the language of dying and rising parallel to Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. A theme in Paul’s letters is that we participate in this same movement. We are transformed by dying “with Christ” and being raised “with Christ.” This is the pattern of Christian spirituality.

We experience a kind of “death” in times when we grasp the harm we have caused others or recognize our own selfishness in a way we had been blind to in the past. We come to the place we have to humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness.

We experience a kind of “death” when we reach a place where we can no longer run away from or escape our darkest feelings and wounds. In the times when the feelings we want to go away are loudest, we experience our helplessness and our trust in the One who is not me.

We experience a kind of “death” when life disappointments or grief rip to shreds our preconceived expectations of how life was supposed to work. When we persist through these “death” experiences and wait with trust in the love that is beyond us, a resurrection to new life awaits.

Sometimes for whatever reason – disappointment, grief, or just getting older – old ways of praying don’t work anymore. Faith-language that used to mean something falls flat, and doesn’t seem to connect with life anymore.

Does that mean that you are losing your faith? Or can you keep taking steps forward in the dark, submitting to God’s mystery, trusting God to hold you when you are no longer in control of your life.

Recently we have sometimes gone on walks at night with our boys, as it is a good way to get them to sleep. When we go on the trail through some trees, it can get quite dark. I find these are my favorite moments. I have to pay attention. There is something about the dark that draws me out of myself, out of my thoughts, to simply contemplate the stillness of the air, the song of cicadas, and the vastness of the sky. I feel closer to God when I am drawn out of myself.

When an old way of praying fails, sometimes we find new ways to encounter God. When words to talk about God and Christian faith no longer seem as meaningful, we are invited to allow the box we had put God in to die, so that we have greater openness and trust in a God we cannot domesticate or control.

The second half of our response that is clear in 2 Corinthians is that we are entrusted with the “message of reconciliation.”

Paul uses the metaphor of a royal delegation or ambassador to describe his work. He is part of this delegation that God has sent ahead to announce God’s initiative of reconciliation with a hostile world.

Let that image sink in a little, and what it would be like to imagine our congregation that way!

Early Anabaptists were fervent evangelizers. They sent missionaries and baptized new believers. 60 Anabaptist missionaries held a conference in 1527, and only two or three lived to see the fifth year of their movement. Intense persecution unfortunately caused the Anabaptist movement to go into retreat for survival’s sake. Our context is quite different from 16th century Europe. We are not openly persecuted, we find it hard to talk about our faith.

I have begun reading *Tongue-tied: Learning the lost art of talking about faith*, by Sara Wenger Shenk, president of AMBS seminary when I attended. She acknowledges some of the standard reasons given for the decline of the church in the US, and adds some reasons of her own, including:

“Our disillusionment or disappointment with the faith we inherited, the superficiality and artificiality of much Christian faith language, our compulsive need for dogmatic belief certainties, ... [and] our lack of resolve to sustain the quality of family and community life necessary for forming faith...”

To talk about the way forward is complicated, but any way forward will involve a deep experience of love and resolve of love. “The love of Christ compels us,” writes Paul in verse 14. After all, God has placed the “message of reconciliation” in us.

I have a few places for us to start.

- Notice who are the people in your life that seem to exude faith, or find it natural to talk about their faith in a way that is authentic and evidenced in how they live. What do you learn from their example?
- Practice talking about our faith in church. This seems simple, but it takes practice. It is our tendency outside of a service to talk about anything else. We will have to get past some of our differences, and get past some of our anxiety around whether we will find the right words, or whether others will judge us for either not having the right theology or sophistication.
- Practice becoming more open about talking about how we draw strength in the midst of life struggles or how you strive to make your life count (because of God's love). These are topics that naturally bring in the language of faith. These topics in of themselves make us vulnerable when we talk about them with other people, regardless of whether we frame

the conversation in faith-language. Start in easier circles, but expand to people you normally wouldn't normally talk to.

- Talking about your faith, speaking to your experience of reconciliation is not something we will succeed in doing if we feel guilty into it. Imagine something that is central to who you are: your occupation, your family, or your main hobbies. You can't help but mention it, if people get to know you. You have an intrinsic motivation to do so. It's part of who you are.

Our goal is to move to where our faith similarly flows from who we are. We only gain the trust for others to entrust their own life experience, struggles, and search for God, if we have that capacity to be vulnerable with them.

God initiates reconciliation with us. God pursues us with love as God lovingly renews creation. Yet we are also entrusted with the awesome responsibility of carrying the message of reconciliation.

QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of things disrupt our relationship with God? How does one become reconciled with God?
2. How do we sustain or deepen connection with God in times of life changes or experiences of doubt?
3. How are you helping others be reconciled with God? How is our church doing this?

BENEDICTION

2 Corinthians 13:11, 14

Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.