

10/03/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION AND SERVICE – PASTOR LOIS

- *Next Sunday* we hope to worship out on the yard, weather permitting.
- *Also next Sunday afternoon* will be a service of baptism for Caiden, Eddie, Jacob and Timothy out at Camp Mennoscah. We can arrive at 3:00, service at 3:30.
- *Last Sunday* was our Community Service Day; we have a few photos to show...
- Nancy Stucky has a letter to read from Sara Hiebert at Bethesda...

CALL TO WORSHIP – PRINTED IN THE BULLETIN

PEACE PRAYER –

We're honored, once again, to have 2 exchange students here at AMC this year. Oihane Lechuga from Spain and Octave Barbe from France. Today is Oihane's 16th birthday! With their multi-lingual skills they can help us to hear a few of the languages in which Jesus is being worshiped and remembered around the world this morning. If you turn to #1038 in VT you'll be able to read along, this prayer written by Oscar Romero from El Salvador. It's printed in Spanish and in English. Oihane will offer it in Catalan and Octave in French and then we'll all join together, reading it in English.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

A couple of items to share with you before our prayer:

- Judy Unruh had hip replacement on Tuesday and was doing very well – they sent her home on Wednesday. But by early Friday morning she was having lots of pain; it was discovered that the pin had cracked the bone and they needed to take her back in to surgery and re-do the procedure, so Judy is recovering now at the NMC. She and Darrell appreciate our prayers for healing.
- Some of you may have heard or read about the tragic death of the young man (freshman in college) from McPherson who died by suicide this past week. He was one of Kyle's former band students and his death has sent shock and deep grief through the community.

Loving God, we come to you this morning with much on our hearts and minds. We offer you the contents in the form of our prayers, acknowledging that you know what's in our hearts and on our minds before we can ever give words to it, and yet, you ask us to pray – to enter into a relationship with you that shows our need and your care.

We thank you God for your good gifts – of harvest, of rain, of loved ones and of plenty. We're grateful for opportunities to serve and to share our time and resources. Specifically, we thank you for the ways those opportunities took shape in our community last Sunday. Thank you for those who organized, who participated, who received blessings in the many forms they came in. God we ask that we might have wisdom and courage to serve in whatever ways might present themselves to us. Give us eyes to see and wide open hearts to respond.

This morning we proclaim that you are the God of life and of healing, of mercy and forgiveness. We pray for Judy as she heals from surgery to replace the hip. May she know your

presence and comfort as she regains mobility. Be with Darrell as he travels back and forth between the hospital and home – give him what he needs as Judy’s caretaker in the coming days. We ask for continued healing and relief from pain for Connie Wiens. Be with her and her physicians as they try to figure out what will be helpful to her.

Merciful God, we pray for the family of the young man who died by suicide this past week. We pray for the students, the teachers (especially Kyle), those who were impacted by Jackson – his life and his death. It’s so hard to grasp the reality of a tragedy like this one. And so, God, in your mystery, in ways we can’t explain or understand, we ask for the presence of your Holy Spirit to be felt in the lives of all who are staggering under the weight of this grief. Each human being is your beloved child, created in your image. Help us to know that deep, in our bones and in our souls.

We pray for others whose grief you know. The Schroeder family in their loss of Debbie, the Friesen family in their loss of Carol, for those who are grieving loved ones due to covid or other illnesses or reasons. Wrap your love and care around each one who suffers – give them comfort and hope, give them trust in you.

O God we pray fervently for Bethesda – for the board as they seek wisdom and direction. We pray for Sara and each staff member as they do their best to continue on their mission to offer quality care. And we pray for each resident. Help them to be secure in your love for them. Be with this community as we all seek your guidance and work together to support Bethesda.

We offer you our praise and celebrations, God. For mile-markers along the way in life that remind us of where we’ve been, where we’re going and that you’ve been with us all along the way. We thank you for Brooke and the service she’s offering to the children at the school where she works. Bless her as she celebrates her birthday this week – and be with the other members of the Service Adventure household as they continue to learn to know and support each other. We thank you for Oihane and pray your blessings on her on this day of her 16th birthday. Thank you for Caiden, Eddie, Timothy and Jacob as we anticipate celebrating with them their baptisms next week.

We pray, God for your world. We pray for the Earth as she groans and responds to the climate changes. We pray for your creatures, for the oceans and the skies, the forests and the fields as they all try to survive and carry on. We pray for your people, your children all over this globe, for those who don’t have enough and whose lives hang in the balance. May your love and mercy prevail.

Bless us now, O Lord through the rest of this service, this day, this week. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

SERMON -- “FORGIVEN” – PASTOR CALEB
Col. 3:12-17

At the end of the day, our boys can often use a bath. Austin likes to wear his “football” uniform multiple days at a time. It can really stink.

Bath time is an evening ritual in which the day’s dirt is washed away, along with fun splashing water in the tub. After bath, we put on clean jammies. There is a transformation not so different than how early Christians viewed baptism.

Our passage in Colossians compares the transformation in Christ to a change of clothing. Verse 8 characterizes the old dirty garments as “anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language.” Colossians describes a transformation. The transformed person takes off the old self and puts on a new self that is “renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

We might talk about it as a transformation of each individual person, as each of us takes off the dirty clothes and puts on the new. But it is clear that Paul is addressing a whole group of people. When Paul says “you” it is always a “you all” – all of you.

And he gives a number of reciprocal commands: No lying to each other, bear with one another, forgive each other, instruct each other (verses 9, 13, 16).

Meanwhile, the qualities of the new clothing all have to do with relationships in a community. You have compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and finally – “the bond of perfection” – love.

It’s a community where the old divisions of Jew and Gentile, slave and free move to the background compared to the primary identity which is Christ. There isn’t an expectation that there will never be conflict. Rather the goal is to “bear with” one another and to forgive one another whenever there is any complaint or blame.

When I was helping to lead a small church plant of primarily Colombian refugee families in Ecuador, there was a period of time of great division among these families. One family in particular expressed their deep past pain through negativity and mistrust which infected a number of others who related more closely to this family.

Our church plant was divided among those who were accused the church’s refugee project of being unfair, while others accused this first group of telling lies. There was additional mistrust and accusation between families. I had trouble keeping track of the different narratives.

All I and the other small group pastor could do was hint at themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. One woman named Katerine was more direct. When she took a turn leading a Bible study, handpicked verses and chose readers to push each person to stop the act and forgive. Still the situation didn’t immediately change.

Then abruptly during a Sunday morning service, during our "passing the peace" time, a young man apologized to a woman. She responded with forgiveness. That was it. All of a sudden without warning. Not everything was resolved, but this moment began a significant turning point toward some letting go and reconciliation.

Forgiveness begins with God’s forgiveness given in Christ.

In *Anabaptist Essentials*, Palmer Becker describes the cross as the universal symbol of forgiveness. The vertical beam represents our forgiveness from God, while the horizontal is our forgiveness for one another.

Christians believe that God's forgiveness comes at God's initiative and is completely God's doing. The practice of communion, as we will do today, is one very physical way of reminding ourselves of the gift of forgiveness, as we are guests at Christ's table.

We take the bread and the cup *given for us as for-given* people.

While we appreciate the ways that different Christian traditions have spoken or taught about God's forgiveness, Anabaptists particularly emphasize that vertical forgiveness with God opens up a transformation where we practice horizontal forgiveness with each other.

Forgiveness opens the floodgates to transformation for both the one forgiven and for us who forgive. We are not just let off the hook, like a cop who gives you a warning even though you really were speeding. Accepting God's forgiveness begins a work in our souls to change us into new people.

Embracing God's forgiveness is not about feeling like an evil horrible worm. Nor is there such a thing as being such a virtuous person that you have no need of forgiveness. We just are human, with sin, mistakes, and beautiful potential. God sees the person underneath the filthy garment who is beloved and created in the divine image.

So we are called to do the same -- see that of God in each person underneath whatever imperfect clothing they are wearing. It's not about keeping score. I suppose it's true on some level that some have caused greater harm or hurt than others. If I murder someone in cold blood, that has much greater consequences and harm than if I had gossiped about or badmouthed that person. But whatever the score, it doesn't change the humanity of all involved.

That *was* the point of Jesus' little parable to Simon the Pharisee. He said, "Simon, I've got something to say to you. There was this creditor, and one person owed \$50,000 while another owed \$5000. Who will love that creditor more?" (Luke 7:41-42).

If you want to keep score of how much someone was forgiven, then maybe the real score is how the people with the biggest mistakes end up with the greatest love for God?

The New Testament uses two different words for forgive.

The common word for "forgive" in the Gospels is *aphiemi*, which can also mean "release," like release from prison. Jesus taught in Aramaic, and in Aramaic the word for "sin" is the same word as for monetary "debt." For Aramaic speakers, the same way you forgive or *release* a debt, you forgive or *release* another person's harm.

The second word for forgive is *charizomai*. This is the word Paul chooses in Colossians. It is built off of the word for "grace." Forgiveness is an act of offering grace.

Many of you remember the tragic shooting of Amish schoolgirls 15 years ago. Hours into the tragedy, members of the Amish community expressed forgiveness for the shooter. People were astounded.

This doesn't mean that the parents didn't feel great pain or anger. It is simply that their faith emphasized a disposition toward forgiving. They were already formed in this way of approaching life, and when tragedy struck, forgiveness was the trained response, much as we know what to do in a fire or tornado drill.

Many of you know the story of Dirk Willems, who is another example of a disposition of forgiveness. Dirk Willems was in prison because of his involvement with the Anabaptist movement. He managed to escape and was chased by a guard. Willems made it across a frozen pond, while the guard was heavy enough that he fell through the ice. Willems could have escaped, but instead turned around to rescue the guard, only to ultimately be recaptured and executed. It is an impactful story.

Last Saturday, I attended the Western District Conference Reference Council. During the teaching time, Lois Barret characterized the church as a "sign of the reign of God."

The church is not equivalent to the reign of God by any means. We understand ourselves as a "preview" or "demonstration plot" of God's reign by the nature of our life together before a watching world.

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective says it this way: *"The church is a new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and to provide a foretaste of the church's glorious hope."*

Hopefully our flavor as a "foretaste" will make people want to take additional bites. Practicing forgiveness before the watching eyes of the world is a crucial way that we are a sign of the reign of God.

Before I go farther, it's important to say what forgiveness is and isn't.

- Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. It takes at least two for there to be reconciliation. Forgiveness is my response or journey regardless of what the other may do.
- Forgiveness is not necessarily about releasing the wrongdoer from all consequences for their actions. Sometimes the other needs consequences in order to be on their own journey of transformation. Sometimes the safety and protection of others is at stake.
- Forgiveness often doesn't happen in a moment. When the hurt or violation is great, being told to forgive may feel re-traumatizing. In that case, the church must have compassion for the person who has been violated before insisting on forgiveness.
- A journey or process with forgiveness in mind is as much for the sake of the wholeness of the harmed person as much as the one who harmed. We don't have to "arrive," just agree to be on that journey.
- Forgiveness means journeying toward personal healing, until being able to release the power that this wound or pain has to define one's life. Here the idea of forgiveness as a kind of release seems helpful.

- Forgiveness comes along the way of choosing to get *better* rather than *bitter*.

If you are the person who has hurt another person, whether or not you had any such intent, you have a parallel journey. Consider the possibility that you may not fully grasp what your action or behavior really caused the other person. Often there is a mismatch of perception of what really happened.

We often just don't "get it" (and of course, the reverse is possible: we can be overly-scrupulous in thinking you've caused greater offense than you really have).

We tend to want to forget any memory of something regrettable. We want to pretend it didn't happen, so it doesn't threaten our image of ourselves as "good people."

The greater the hurt, the more important it is to journey through confession, repentance, and full understanding of how your choices impacted others, in order to repair the harm, especially if this is in the context of marriage or friendship, or family relationship.

It's a painful process that means dying to our false identities as "good people," and leaning into our unearned identity as beloved and forgiven children of God.

It's not about "am I a good person?" or "is so and so a good person?" None of us are really "good people." Very few are really "bad people." We are just human, which means we are simultaneously selfish, immature, and fallible, and also bearers of God's image, invited to journey toward Christ-likeness

Accepting God's forgiveness means I let go of any claim of greater righteousness or superiority to anyone else. I'm just human.

Asking for forgiveness means I humble myself to the point of admitting I failed. I let go of claiming the greater righteousness or superiority of someone who didn't do anything wrong.

Forgiving means I look past my hurt to see the other's humanity. I let go of claiming greater righteousness or superiority such that it's my right to refuse to forgive.

God invites us to make our lives about taking off one set of "clothes" and putting on another. God always sees the goodness of the person underneath the dirty clothes.

God invites us to be a people who aim to do this together.

QUESTIONS

1. Can we separate vertical forgiveness from God with horizontal forgiveness between one another? Why or why not?
2. How does God's forgiveness change us so that we are able to journey toward forgiving others?
3. What broken relationship have you experienced? Why is it so hard to confess wrongdoing and accept forgiveness?

4. How do we “bear with one another” or forgive when honestly don’t perceive a situation the same way?

SEGUE TO COMMUNION

At this time we will transition to our service of communion.

As we center our thoughts on God's forgiveness for us, we receive the bread and the cup of Christ as physical embodied ways to remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples and his forgiveness expressed in his loving willingness to go to the cross.

Communion means "union with" -- this is a moment when we are in unity with God and also with one another and with Christians around the world, especially on this Sunday when many Christian groups doing this with us in a diversity of ways particular to each culture.

This table is open to all who have faith in Christ. Even while it is open, communion is only meaningful when it represents the forgiveness we have found with God and which we offer to others.

If you know in your heart that you are struggling to forgive, receive these elements as a recommitment to the journey to forgive whoever has hurt you, to forgive yourself for being human, and even to forgive both humanity and the world for creating pain.

Most of you picked up the elements on your way in. If you happen to miss doing so and would like them, please raise your hand and the deacons are ready to pass out the elements to any who need them, while we sing our next hymn.

COMMUNION WORDS

Blest are those who from this table live their days in gratitude!

Words of introduction/explanation

- Notice the variety of breads displayed here in the front – symbolic of the Christians all around the world, joined together today in this act of remembering Jesus and in our common love for him and desire to follow him in our lives.

Words for the Bread –

We are mindful that God’s children all around the world are joined this morning in remembering that as Jesus was sitting at the table with his friends, he took bread, broke it, gave thanks for it and said, “This is my body, broken for you. Whenever you eat it, remember me.” Loving God, we thank you for the bread of life made known to us through your servant Jesus. Amen. Let us eat together and remember the goodness of God’s love.

Words for the Juice –

After supper Jesus took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant with God made possible by my death. Whenever you drink this cup, remember me.” We give you thanks, loving God, for sending Jesus to us – the one who showed us what sacrificial love looks like as he died on the cross. Amen. Let us drink together and remember the covenant we have with God and with one another.

Prayer of Thanksgiving –

O God, with deep gratitude, we thank you for this moment, this meal, this congregation and for your children in all parts of the world. Having tasted your goodness, let us share your peace. Send us out, to live as a foretaste of your reign, as ordinary people that you have called to follow you, to extend your forgiveness and proclaim your love as citizens of your kingdom. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go into this next week with the peace of Christ ruling in your hearts. Remember that you are called into one body. Find time to encourage one another in all wisdom.

Let psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs fill your hearts with thanksgiving.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly so that your every word and action will be in the name of Jesus and an expression of thanks to God the Father.