

1/30/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl on this final, balmy Sunday in January! I think we're in for a bit of a roller coaster ride with the weather this week – I hope you can enjoy the sunshine today and tomorrow.

Today is the final sermon in the series, “How shall we be church?”, although we'll keep discussing and thinking about this question in the weeks and months ahead and we hope there will be some discerning discussion in Sunday school classes. There will also be a scheduled opportunity for discussion for those who don't participate in SS – stay tuned for more info... Worshipful work is a notion I learned about many years ago – in the simplest terms, an acknowledgment that when we're at our best and paying attention to our spiritual growth and development, everything we do can be shaped and understood as worship. This is especially true of the work of the church – whether it's board or committee meetings, preparing or participating in Sunday school lessons, cleaning and maintaining the building, working on the yard, or talking about the budget and participating in the church's annual meeting – it can all be done in the spirit of worship, so this will be our focus and our intent this morning.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION OR SERVICE

CALL TO WORSHIP – for those of you zooming in, Delton has the words on the screen.

Leader: There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

People: There are different ways to serve the same God, and we can each do different things.

Leader: Yet the same God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do.

People: The revelation of the Spirit is given to each for the common good.

INVOCATION –

God of life, we thank you that in our work as well as our worship we gather in your presence.

Come among us and guide us as we meet together.

In our uncertainties, give us direction; in our differences, give us understanding;
in our reporting, give us honesty; in our planning, give us boldness;
in our deciding, give us graciousness.

Let us never forget that we are your people, called to proclaim the reign of God,
committed to follow Christ in life, united as one body in the Spirit. Amen

GATHERING HYMNS

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB YODER

God who created and sustains all life,

We rejoice in your manifold works that exceed our comprehension.

The deep blue sky, the frosty ground, the multitude of living creatures on this planet in their rich variety, the mysteries of our vast universe – all belongs to you.

Though we are so small, we believe that you care for us and that you hear our prayer. You number the hairs of our heads. Your voice whispers into our ears. You hide yourself within our moments and our days.

Our faith proclaims that somehow your fullness was pleased to dwell in the human Jesus. You redeem us and all things by entering the broken places. We have a life-long journey to learn to abide in the love of Jesus and to live as his disciples.

Breathe your Holy Spirit on us as members of your church. Prepare us to be bearers of your reconciling love with the people that you place into our lives. Give us wisdom for the moments when we feel at a loss for what to do.

God, we confess our lives feel distracted and cluttered by all the things we feel we need to do.

As we struggle to simply get through the week and do life, we forget that we are first of all your disciples and friends of Jesus, and Christ's church. We are driven instead by a need to succeed as our culture defines it.

Forgive us, O God. Soften the hardened places of our hearts.

Give us courage to make a difference with the brokenness that is outside of us, and also let your love melt away the sin that is within us.

Give us the courage to confront the ways that we are complicit in everything that angers or disturbs us in our external world.

Have mercy, O God, and let our hearts be at peace resting in the assurance of your forgiveness and love. Christ Jesus, we need your grace tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after that.

Thank you for the Alexanderwohl family, for this particular immediate family of your extended family. We bring prayers on behalf of our congregation, community, and world.

We give thanks for the hard work of staff at Bethesda and other area nursing homes to avoid outbreaks among residents. We lift up residents and staff with the ongoing stress and toll of COVID. We are weary. Have mercy, O God.

We continue lift up Leona and Norman Schroeder as Leona has returned to NMC this week with series bloodclots. We rejoice that she is improving a bit, remains steadfast in hope, and has the

support of her family. God, bring peace, resilience, and healing to Leona. Hear all the many prayers offered for Norman and Leona both.

We also continue to lift up Steve Janzen, the father of Rachael Burkholder as he recovers from appendicitis.

We pray for your comfort in a time of grief for Radene Unruh and the Duerksen family after the unexpected passing of her cousin Jon Duerksen who will be missed by all who frequented the Newton public library.

We pray as well for the Lindeman family, with the loss of Kyle, grandson of Larry and Mary, and nephew of Chad and Jonna.

Farther away from us, we pray for those in the east coast who are dealing with the aftermath of a major winter storm.

We lift up the many unspoken prayer concerns on our hearts this morning for both our community and far beyond.

We pray for our midweek activities as they hopefully resume this Wednesday. Work through the learning and fellowship.

We pray for your wisdom, guidance and grace, God, as we participate together in the annual congregational meeting today.

We pray for you love to drive out our fear, in a time when we have so many reasons to feel fear. Fear regarding what markets will do, what Covid will do, fear for the political future of our country, fear for wars looming in our world, fear of what climate change will bring.

Let your love drive out our fear, that we might find courage to be dedicated to the way of Jesus day in and day out. That we might be church every day of the week and every place that we go to.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God of Jesus,

As you are faithful to us, we seek to be faithful to you in all things, in every action of every day of the week.

Faithful in our words, faithful in our actions, faithful in our choices and priorities, faithful in our relationships, faithful with our resources.

Receive these offerings as a sign of the offering of our lives, as we seek to demonstrate our gratitude and faithfulness.

Amen

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

How shall we be church? – Part II

The Apostle Paul had a LOT to say about how to follow Jesus together, how to be The Church. I've heard it said that Jesus came to bring The Kingdom – and what he got was The Church. As we learned last year, Jesus' teachings turned the status quo of his time (and of all time) upside-down. And after his crucifixion, resurrection and return to heaven, it became the job of faithful followers like Paul to figure out how to organize, how to carry on Jesus' message with as much integrity as they could muster. Things were kind of a mess in those early, first and second century times with different interpretations of what Jesus had taught, (and what he meant) different leaders vying for power and all sorts of other, contemporary belief systems getting mixed in. As Paul traveled, spread the good news and gathered groups of disciples, he wrote letters and he gave speeches, and much of what we have come to understand about how to be The Church is through the writing and teaching of Paul. None of these passages that Tammy just read for us should sound completely new; Caleb has been preaching about these ideas, broadly, for the month of January. So, hopefully some of these themes should be ringing familiar by now.

I'll highlight three characteristics of The Church that seem significant to think about as we move forward.

First, we heard Paul, again, using the powerful image of the body to describe the church. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." And this "belonging to each other" is more than simply working together as if we're collaborating on some kind of a school project together. "Belonging to each other" describes a way of being that's a sort of paradox. On the one hand, there's a sober humility, with none of us thinking too highly of ourselves, and on the other hand, there's a gentle confidence, as we focus together on being the people of Christ – gifted by Christ, using those gifts to be Christ's presence in the world. So that when we talk about being a member of Christ's body, it's different than being a member of a club, paying your dues and showing up when you feel like it. Being a member of Christ's body is to offer a role that the body needs to fully function. And to appreciate the role that others fulfill, realizing the need for each one to offer their part.

Paul wrote to both the church in Rome and in Ephesus about this notion of the church functioning as one body, under the guidance of the one Holy Spirit, called to one hope, through one faith, and one baptism. It's an impossibly unified vision of The Church, but Paul knew people. He knew that human beings get off track, lost in the weeds, we nit-pick at each other and we argue about who's "in" and who's "out". Paul knew that people take each other for granted and are generally more concerned about efficiency than about equality. And Paul knew that people mean well and *want* to be faithful disciples, but that following Jesus is really hard and if we stand a chance of making a difference in this world we're going to have to stand together, to "belong to each other", to remember that we're bound together by God's Spirit of peace. That's the kind of bond that empowers us to show up for one another, to prioritize our

commitment to God and to each other over all the other distractions that take our time and energy and resources.

But, of course, this doesn't mean that we always agree with one another! It doesn't even mean that we always necessarily like one another. It means we risk gentle honesty, careful listening, investing time and vulnerability with one another. It means that sometimes we'll probably hurt and be hurt by one another. And in those times, perhaps, comes the true test of being part of "one body". What does it look like, then, to restore relationships, to agree to disagree but not to hurt one another? Can we give each other grace?

Second, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul was writing from prison, as he often did, and from prison, he was instructing his friends to rejoice in the Lord! He's not talking about a shallow or a superficial cheeriness, but a deep joy in what God has done in Christ and is continuing to do through the saints (US!). So this might beg the question, "What can we see Christ doing through us that gives us deep joy?"

An idea that is closely related to this deep joy is a word Paul used in his letter to the Romans, the Greek *hilarotes*. In her book, *Truly the Community; Romans 12 and How to Be the Church*, Marva Dawn identifies this word which translates into English as hilarity as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the church. She writes, "I do not intend this word usage to bring the contemporary understanding of hilarity – merely a superficial "noisy merriment" ... to the text of Romans 12... The gladness Paul identifies by means of this word choice arises from a deep sense of well-being founded in trusting the Grace-Giver to work through his gifts to us. I use the word hilarity to describe the spirit of the Christian community... to name the glad hope that could characterize God's people."

Like Paul's impossibly unified vision of The Church, Dawn uses this word, "Hilarity" as an unrealized, ideal. "People who have been Christians for a while are not very often characterized by the profound gladness that marked the earliest followers of Jesus... One of the most powerful reasons for our lack of gladness is that ours is a culture of solo efforts. We live our Christian faith independently – not inextricably linked with other members of the Body of believers. Consequently, we do not experience the support that true community engenders... So I use the word Hilarity to describe the ideal Christian community, and my intention is to make us stop and think: what would it be like if the Christian Church were truly a community that thoroughly enjoyed itself? It seems to me it could change the world!"

Finally, as we continue to worship and head into the business of our annual meeting, let it not be lost on us that from prison Paul was encouraging the faithful not to worry, but to pray. He was writing to people who were poor, some were slaves and very few of them would have known the meaning of security as we experience security. It's ironic that those who live in the most wealth and luxury are often those who are the most worried and anxious. Paul doesn't mean that we should have an irresponsible or cavalier attitude toward money, but an ability to distinguish between our individual worry and a concern for others that builds up the community.

He also instructs us to pray with gratitude. When we bring our requests to God, we are acknowledging our need for God's providence. But our requests should always come alongside of our thanksgiving. Gratitude to God will allow God's peace to guard our hearts and minds.

So... to summarize –

- The church functions ideally in unity, (not conformity) as a body, with each member belonging to the other and essential for the full and healthy functioning of the whole.
- The church could change the world if it were characterized by its Spirit-filled joy and gladness.
- The church can experience and share God's peace as we bring our requests to God with gratitude.

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May it be so for us and for all God's people. Amen.