

8/7/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome to Alexanderwoh! We are gathered here to worship our loving God who we know through Jesus and who is present to us in the Spirit.

This is a time of year when there is a lot going on. Many of you have been at Threshing Days in Goessel, and some of you have been involved with various aspects of the event.

Some of you have been away on vacation, some are on vacation now. A few of us have been sick recently. Many of you are anticipating the beginning of the school year in a couple of weeks. In the hectic moments of life, God is present.

Let's let this hour be an opportunity to set aside the preoccupations of our minds to center ourselves in God's presence.

We begin with a few verses from that psalm that beautifully describe the ways that God is evident in creation.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Let my whole being bless the LORD! LORD my God, how fantastic you are! You are clothed in glory and grandeur!

People: You build your lofty house on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot, going around on the wings of the wind.

Leader: The birds in the sky make their home, chirping loudly in the trees. From your lofty house, you water the mountains.

People: The earth is filled full by the fruit of what you've done.

Leader: You make grass grow for cattle; you make plants for human farming in order to get food from the ground

All: LORD, you have done so many things! You made them all so wisely! The earth is full of your creations!

INVOCATION (ADAPTED FROM JUSTO GONZALEZ, VT 927)

We worship you today, God, the Father almighty,
Maker of the heavens and the earth,
Creator of all peoples and all cultures,

We call upon your name, Christ Jesus,
God made flesh in a person for all humanity
God made flesh in one culture for all cultures,
God made flesh in love and grace for all creation.

Come Holy Spirit,
Presence of God in our peoples and our cultures;
And power of God to become new creatures,

With infinite gifts to become one people.
May it be so.

I'll now invite Ann Hiebert to come forward, as she offers our peace prayer for this month.

CONFERENCE SHARING

Last weekend, our family along with Delton and Janice and Lynel and Vickie Unrau traveled to Texas for the annual assembly of the Western District Conference that our congregation is a part of. We want to share briefly about this experience.

This year it was held at Camp Copass in Denton, TX. The location was a large camp that had nice accommodations, good meals, and a number of recreation options including 18 holes of mini-golf that our boys enjoyed as well as a pool.

Beth was there in the capacity of business manager for the conference, so it is always a stressful time leading up to that weekend of the year. The other adults were all delegates representing our congregation in the delegate sessions.

I'll say a little bit about the delegate sessions and then let Delton and Janice share from their experience, and conclude with notes from Lynel and Vickie who are unable to be with us today.

The delegate agenda was pretty straightforward, and including the reception into membership of two new churches. Aposento Alto has been a church plant in Wichita and now has become an established congregation.

The other congregation, Casa de Paz, is located in Guatemala City, Guatemala. This is a unique arrangement, due to the fact that one of their leaders is Gilberto Flores who formerly lived in Kansas and was involved in WDC. So now our conference actually has a congregation in another country. There will no doubt be some opportunities to travel to Guatemala and form connections with this church.

Delton and Janice and my family attended the service at Luz del Evangelio on Sunday morning. Our friends at Luz send their greetings and miss you all. I gave words of greeting to the congregation, but did not have to preach this time. There was a visiting preacher from Argentina who gave a very lively sermon.

Notes from Lynel Unrau:

- Mennonite Church becoming more and more diverse.
- Lasting issues from the pandemic. 18 of 51 congregations in pastoral transition
- Saddened with the withdrawal of Turpin Mennonite Church
- Joy of two Hispanic Churches joining WDC
- Worship meditations challenging us to be more kind and generous in this uncertain world. Thanks
- I drove one of the vans down to Camp Copass Denton, TX. Both enjoyable and intense with road construction and heavy thunderstorms! What---RAIN?

[Delton and Janice also shared]

OFFERING PRAYER (ADAPTED FROM ANN DAY, STJ 148)

God,

You have shown us the meaning of generosity
in the rich diversity of creation,
in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ,
and in the never-ending gift of the Holy Spirit.

You have abundantly blessed us and called us
to be a community that honors each other,
to be servants to others with joy,
and to share our love and material possessions.

Enable us rejoice in what you have given and in what is ours to give. Amen.

WE BELIEVE

Exodus 34:5-6, Colossians 1:15-20, John 14:15-17

Our older son Austin likes to ask questions. They can be about all kinds of topics, such as how something is made or how something works.

He can also without warning ask deep theological or philosophical questions. One second, we might be talking about football, Spiderman, or bodily functions, and then abruptly a question like,

“Daddy, why is there life? Why did God make us?”

“Well...” I answer, “I guess God was bored, and wanted there to be a world.”

Some other deep questions include: “Why did God make tornadoes?” (or make it so hot, or make mosquitoes) “Is God longer than the sea?” “Why didn’t God make me to be like Spiderman?”

It is natural to ask questions and wonder at things, as we try to make sense of our lives and our faith. In fact, part of owning one’s faith is asking faithful questions.

This morning will be a little different than most because we had three scripture readings instead of just one. The first one from Exodus describes God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, as Moses was giving God’s law to the Israelites.

The second from Colossians is one of the most profound descriptions of Jesus, and the third Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit.

I chose these to match the first three articles of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. To really do justice to either the Scripture readings or the articles of the Confession of Faith they relate to would take hours.

Over the next number of weeks, our messages will be based on the twenty-four articles of the Confession of Faith. I want to take a little bit of time to explain what we are doing:

The Confession was adopted in 1995 in Wichita by the two Mennonite denominations that eventually merged. Its goal was to describe the shared beliefs of the churches to foster unity. Our goal with this is similar: to have a kind of bird's eye view of how Mennonites have understood our Christian faith.

The point is not to make any kind of statement a litmus test of who is a better Christian. Our faith in Jesus is meant to be lived, not merely believed, or preoccupied with finer points of doctrine.

Some of my hopes as we look at the Confession of Faith over the next weeks are:

- 1) To remind ourselves that we have more in common than we might disagree about.
- 2) To have a starting place for talking about what we are committed to
- 3) To have some shared vocabulary for talking about the places where we may not all see alike.

WHAT IS THE CONFESSION?

Anabaptist Christians have always respected early Christian creeds such as the Nicene creed or Apostles' Creed, but we have never emphasized them or had a practice of reciting them in worship. We have had a number of confessional statements that described what the movement believed or was committed to, beginning with the Schleithem Confession in 1527.

We might be able to think about these confessions less as decrees with leadership telling the church: "this is what you all have to think and do!" I think of them more as representatives of the entire church coming together asking, "who are we?" "what is our common faith?" "How do we commit to practicing our faith and living our lives?"

[SLIDE: WHAT IS THE CONFESSION OF FAITH FOR?]

What this is *not* about is creating some kind of litmus test for who is in and who is out or who the "true believers" are. The points on the screen summarize the stated purpose of the Confession in its introduction:

Basically, to give guidelines for interpreting Scripture, as well as give guidance for faith and practice according to the times we are in (already we are a few years past 1995).

It's intended to be a foundation for unity, not division. It's also a starting point to explain our faith and practices to new people as well as people who don't share these convictions.

[SLIDE: AUTHORITY?]

No doubt when this was first created and in the years since there is a temptation to use it as a kind of authoritative document – what's allowed and what's not allowed.

These are my thoughts on "authority" – the only real authority is God, whom no one can claim to have an inside line with. We understand Jesus to be the clearest revelation of who God is, and the Bible is not so much the authority in of itself but our primary source to seek

understanding who God is. The third tier of authority is not a pope or council of bishops but everyone seeking to listen to the Spirit and interpret the Bible together.

As I see it, the *Confession of Faith* is not an authoritative thing, but a tool for teaching and discernment.

--

OK, with that introduction, let's look briefly at a few passages of Scripture.

[SLIDE: EXODUS]

The first passage from Exodus contains an early confessional statement about God for the ancient Israelites. It is placed in the storyline when Moses goes up a second time to Mount Sinai so that God can write the law on stone tablets.

Moses had broken the first stone tablets in anger because the Israelites started worshipping a golden calf while he was gone. Poor Moses probably felt like a parent – can't even leave these people for a brief time without them getting into trouble.

At any rate, this confessional verse says that the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

I'm always fascinated by word families – words that are related to each other because they are derived from the same root word.

"Compassionate" in Hebrew comes from a root meaning "tender familial love." The Hebrew word for "womb" comes from this same root. The Arabic language is closely related to Hebrew; the Arabic words for "compassionate" and "merciful" used as titles for God in Islam also come from this root.

This ancient confession teaches that God is not aloof. God is not a distant first cause, who got the universe in motion but otherwise is uninvolved. Rather, this God is deeply relational. This relationality begins in the inner life of God as trinity, with eternal relationship between the father, son, and Holy Spirit.

[SLIDE: GOD]

Now we have a summary paragraph about the first article of our Confession about God.

You can also find these summary paragraphs in the bulletin. The actual articles are a good bit longer than this, and you are encouraged to read them online, or borrow a copy of the Confession.

It says that God exists and is pleased with people who come toward God in faith and trust, rather than a bunch of good deeds.

We can't see God, and it is understandable for anyone to wonder about traditional religious claims. Yet our confession states that God has spoken to humanity in a variety of ways, most of all through Jesus, who we understand to be God's eternal Word and Wisdom present in a flesh-

and-bones human being. For Christians, the chief way that God has acted to bring salvation and reconciliation is through the person of Jesus.

Our confession also makes clear that God is loving and that there is no contradiction in God between holiness, justice, and love. The longer version makes this clear by talking about God's holy love, righteous love, and suffering love, among others.

Many cosmologists are drawn to some sort of spirituality or faith because of their work. Many secular-minded people feel it makes sense to affirm some kind of meaning and source to the universe. But there are still more questions to answer before you arrive at biblical or Christian faith.

Is the creator of the universe mindlike, personal, and relational? Does this creator have consciousness? Is this creator somehow present and involved in all aspects of the world?

By faith, we answer these questions with a yes – *or* we choose to live our lives as if the answer is yes, even if we admit there is some mystery.

[SLIDE: COLOSSIANS]

One of the longest and most profound confessional statements about Jesus in the New Testament is this one in Colossians. I'll admit it's a little hard to see how you get from Jesus of Nazareth the remarkable, crucified human being to the Son as the "firstborn over all creation."

By saying that the Son is the "image" or "icon" of the invisible God, we're saying that the way we see God is by looking to Jesus. All of God's fullness dwelled in Jesus – not an easy idea to grasp, when you are thinking of the creator of the universe.

If it's true, then we'll have to spend some time seeking to really understand the Jesus of the Gospels!

[SLIDE: JESUS]

The confessional article of course draws more broadly from the New Testament than just Colossians. It understands the death and resurrection of Jesus as central to revealing God's salvation and reconciliation.

The longer version also goes into more detail about the life of Jesus and the importance of Jesus' refusal to use violence, and the servant character of his ministry.

[SLIDE: JOHN 14]

Moving along very, very quickly, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his disciples as *another advocate*. Jesus was the first advocate, and now the Spirit is a continuation of the same role.

We believe that the Spirit lives within us as the presence of Christ still with us and the power to live transformed lives.

[SLIDE: HOLY SPIRIT]

Again, the confessional article draws from more of the New Testament. The Spirit is the “source of our life in Christ as well as a kind of “deposit” or “down payment” of the future transformation that we hope for.

The Spirit is the bridge between trying to make ourselves live according to our best understanding of what is God’s will for our lives, but always falling short – on the one hand – and having God declare us “not guilty” without being at all changed.

Trusting that Spirit is trusting that God’s power is *already* within us, working to change us from the inside. Of course, it might seem like we don’t always have clear evidence that this is really happening, but by faith we trust that it is so.

[SLIDE: HEBREW WORD FAMILY]

Remember that confessional statement in Exodus says that God is “abounding in love and faithfulness”?

The word for “faithfulness” is “Emet.” Sometimes it is translated as “truth” and other times as “faithfulness” or “reliability.” It’s part of a larger family of words that come from a common root having to do with being reliable or trustworthy.

There’s no time to really go into all of these words here on the screen. You already know one of them, which is the word “Amen” that we say all the time.

There’s a word meaning “support pillar” that also comes from this word family, as well as the word for “believe.” In Western culture, “believing” is all an exercise in the head, like doing math problems.

But in Hebrew it is a much thicker and more relational context. You can think of the remodel project in this sanctuary where we are now sitting. After the remodel there were no longer pillars beneath the balconies. The balconies were instead “trustworthy” because they were built with strong beams.

But people still were nervous about them, so the leaders sat directly underneath the balconies when they were filled with people to demonstrate that they were “trustworthy.”

You *believed* that they were safe because you trusted these leaders as well as the craftsmen that built the balconies. You see how this kind of “belief” is a lot thicker and more relational, rather than being detached and in the head?

CONCLUSION [BLANK SLIDE]

When we read the words of our confessional statements, which often use language and images taken from the Bible, you might react in any number of ways.

You might feel this is simple – this is my faith.

Or you might have questions about what the words on a page really mean. What does it really mean to say that God is a trinity, anyway? Clearly Jesus isn’t literally a Lamb – so what is the meaning of that statement?

We don't simply agree with words on a page or try to find the most brilliant philosophical arguments to show we our faith is still relevant in the modern world. We *choose* to approach the world and live our lives as if this faith is true in some deeper way.

I leave us with these challenges:

Pay attention to which images, metaphors, and stories of God speak to you. How does your life experience play into that?

Have you always tended to relate to God as One who is nurturing, loving, and able to forgive? Or as One who is stern and harsh?

Regardless of what words we might use, if we are not able to forgive ourselves or love ourselves, we probably have trouble believing in a God of love deep down, even if we might affirm the idea of a loving God in our heads.

My second challenge is to pay attention to what questions reside inside yourself.

Young children are free to ask questions, but as we grow older, we are often socialized to stop asking questions and just accept whatever is the party line.

But questions open the way for us to think creatively, to seek to truly understand, and to make our beliefs come alive rather than just being words on a page.

Remember that whatever we believe, it can't stay in the head. Our faith isn't a "belief system." It's a way of life – following Jesus. It's a spirituality – encountering God in the midst of life as life is. And it's a vision of how to live in community with one another.

All this together is a "thick" belief or trust. Relying on that strong beam underneath your feet that you can't see. May God continue to guide us and inspire us as we do this work.

BENEDICTION (2 COR 13:14)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.