

## 8/28/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

**Good morning, church!** We are called, gifted and guided by the Holy Spirit to be a sign of God's kingdom! What a holy and joyful calling we have received – thanks be to God!

Clearly I am NOT Bryant Miller – he and Emmett are home fighting off what they hope are the last vestiges of a bug. We wish them God's healing and speedy recovery.

**What announcements** do you have to share with one another this morning?

(Judy – Mission Board event next Sunday)

(Gary – peace committee invite to Death Penalty panel next Saturday)

Please join me in the **Call to Worship**

Leader: Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

**People: There is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to one hope...**

Leader: One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

**All: One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.**

**Let's pray** – Loving God, we are gathered here this morning to worship you and learn of you, to confess our faith in you and to be reminded that we are your body, called and empowered in your name. Meet us here, in this place and time, that we may be filled with your Spirit, equipped to do your work. Amen. (light the peace lamp)

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

God, we are grateful for this lovely morning, grateful to be able to come together in this beautiful space, grateful that our forebears had the wisdom and the courage and the faithfulness to establish this congregation here those many years ago. Although they were far from perfect, like us, their faith was deep and they longed, as we do today, to follow Jesus, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with you, our God. We ask for your forgiveness, Lord, when we fall short of what you have called us to do and to be. Please strengthen us, teach us, guide us to the ways you want us to be your church.

We know that part of being your church is bringing our prayers to you. We pray for those dear to us who need your healing and your comfort. We pray for Bryant and Emmett that they would soon be feeling better and back into their usual routines. O Lord, we continue to pray for Gene Hastings as he struggles to sleep and to eat. Be with Cindy as she cares for Gene. Give them both stamina and strength. We pray for Steve Banman as he has spent the night in the hospital receiving fluids and other care. Be with Sandy as well, giving both of them what they need each day. Lord, be with others in our circles whom you know by name and need. We pray, God, for those whose lives are disrupted by depression, anxiety or other distresses of the mind that manifest themselves in cruel and unpredictable ways. Give your peace and comfort, the assurance of your love and mercy.

We offer our prayers of thanksgiving, God, for your amazing creativity and beauty. We thank you for Shari Wiens and the ways she has, again, shared her gifts of flower gardening, bringing that beauty into our worship space, helping us to praise and glorify you. And while we're thinking of miracles of beauty, we praise you, God, for the safe and happy arrival of Cody

John born to Laura and Jared and siblings Ellie and Logan Unrau last Sunday. Be with them all as they make adjustments to welcome this new member of the family.

O God, we pray for your church beyond these walls and this community – for your faithful children who are doing your work all over the world. We pray for the work of the Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, for other agencies and organizations as well as for individuals, those whose work isn't under the umbrella of any institution. Give strength and guidance for all who are your hands and feet, extending hospitality, providing homes, caring for people and for the well-being of this planet. We pray for your Holy Spirit to breathe and to move among your creation, Lord – among each of us and all the faithful who turn to Jesus as the model, the example of how to live and move and have our being in this world. We pray boldly and humbly in his name. Amen.

#### PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Source and Provider, we offer back some of what you have given to us. We pray your blessings on these gifts – the first and best of what we've been entrusted with. We ask for your blessing, also, on the gifts of our time, our energy, our passions, the skills we're honing and learning. May our thoughts and words and intentions – our whole lives – be gifts to you, God. Amen.

#### INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our initial readings this morning are from Luke and Romans.

In the Gospel of Luke just prior to this reading Jesus has instructed his disciples to find a place where they can share the Passover meal together. When they have gathered and settled, Jesus begins to teach about a particular way of eating together – a simple thing that they do all the time – but when they follow these instructions, it will become a ritual, a special reminder to them of Jesus and who he was calling them to be.

#### CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH – PASTOR CALEB

Acts 11:1-18, Romans 6:1-4, Luke 22:15-20

My whole life has been immersed in church. You may be able to relate. My home church was a major part of our lives growing up. My best friends also were from the same church.

I have early memories of a cappella singing, of gazing at the stain patterns of the ceiling tiles, or at potlucks running out of room on my tray for a sample of everything. This is the community where I was baptized.

Over my life I've experienced churches very different from where I grew up, especially in other cultures, such as Honduras and Ecuador, each distinct from the others. No congregation was perfect, because they were all human. But each in their own way tried to honor God, fostered community, and encouraged love and concern for others.

As we continue through the articles of the Mennonite Confession of Faith, we come to several that have to do with the church. If you are following the numbers with the summary statements, you'll notice I'm skipping article 10 for now. We will come back to that one later.

We certainly encourage you to read these summary statements or the full articles when you are able. There's only so much that can be said in a short message.

#### ACTS STORY

At Alexanderwohl, we've had a fair amount of conversation already on what it means to be church. At the beginning of the year, we had sermons as well as guided discussions in Sunday school classes about what the church is, why even have church, and what it means for us to be church.

That doesn't mean we have this totally figured out. I hope this morning provides yet another lens.

In the book of Acts, the church began in Jerusalem with Jewish folks who became convinced that Jesus was God's Messiah/Anointed One. They too were in the process of figuring out what it meant to be the church.

In Acts 10-11, we have this story in which the apostle Peter is on a roof praying. He is hungry and while someone is preparing his meal he has a vision of all kinds of animals being lowered down from heaven in some kind of giant sheet.

Peter hears the Spirit tell him to kill and eat any of the animals. The only problem, is that all of these animals were off-limits to Jews, considered "unclean." Peter wakes up from this vision very puzzled, just as a delegation arrives from a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Cornelius also had a vision and that told him he needed to talk to a certain Simon Peter.

There's just one problem. Cornelius is not a Jew. He had a reputation as a God-fearing person, generous toward the poor. Jews respected him. But just as it was not kosher to eat pork, it also was not kosher to eat at the same table with someone who was not a Jew. Peter would face that dilemma if he chose to visit.

This is where the meaning of the vision became evident. When Peter meets Cornelius and his household, the Spirit shows up and is poured on people who are both Jews and Gentiles.

Peter learns that the gift of the Spirit isn't limited to those of Jewish background who follow the law of Moses. He learns that God doesn't discriminate between people from any background who seek the transformation that comes with following Jesus.

This isn't a story about accepting any kind of behavior whatsoever. Rather, Peter learns that no human being should ever be called "unclean." All are invited to the same journey of transformation. Peter said, *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism..."*

When Peter met Cornelius, Cornelius bowed to the ground as a gesture of respect – definitely unexpected coming from an accomplished military officer.

Bowing to another person in the Ancient Near East was a way to show profound respect as well as elevate the social status of the other. Put the person greeted that way can choose to "raise the face" of the person who bows. It is a way of returning the favor, like bowing in return.

When Peter says God does not show favoritism, what he literally says is “God doesn’t raise faces.” God isn’t involved in the whole social business of either bowing or raising the face of certain esteemed people. Before God, there is no one in a special esteemed position – or unesteemed position.

To understand the whole story, we have to understand that the church was very much about table fellowship. So, if you were going to accept non-Jews into the church, you were asking the Jewish members to be willing to become ceremonially unclean. This certainly gave the leaders pause, but they couldn’t argue with the fact that Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit the way they had.

None of this might seem like a big deal to us. We don’t have these kind of purity social codes to follow, yet all know that we might feel “impure” or uncomfortable associating with certain people. Maybe it’s associating with someone who is on the opposite side of our cultural divides, or someone who is low-income or another social class, or someone with a lifestyle you’ve always thought of as non-Christian.

Or there’s racial or cultural divides that make us feel out of our comfort zone. When Sunday morning continues to be the most “segregated hour” in the U.S., it’s clear that the American church falls short of this original movement of the Spirit in Acts.

Our confession says that the church includes those who have found faith in Jesus. We make up a new community that is a sign and a foretaste of God’s reign, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For some of us, church has been a place of finding true community. For others, this vision doesn’t ring true. The church consists of flawed human beings, and some of us have had experiences that make us disillusioned with church. It may not always feel like the church is really offering a foretaste of life in God’s kingdom or that Christians really bear evidence of transformation of our conduct.

The church is always in need of ongoing repentance or turning around. We can use our feelings of disillusionment to refuse to settle for less than this original vision of what God has called the church to be. Then, rather than focusing on what may be valid criticism, we focus on how we can do better, on how each of us can be part of change.

#### BAPTISM AND LORD’S SUPPER AS SIGNS

You also may have noticed that this story of the Gentiles becoming part of the church also meant that they received baptism. Baptism as well as the practice of the Lord’s Supper are both foundational practices that define who we are.

The importance of these practices is not that they are something we have to do, but that they are symbols of the gifts that God has given us.

Some traditions tend to align the sign of baptism with a simple decision for Jesus. My mom was baptized at age 9 in the non-denominational church where she grew up. When she moved to the Mennonite community, she was surprised that young people who grew up in the church

might reach the age of 19 and still not be baptized. In her background, you'd be worrying about their eternal destiny by that point if something happened to them.

In our Anabaptist tradition we have often linked baptism to a mature commitment to follow Jesus in life and to be a part of the church. When you emphasize these things, developmentally a person would have to be getting closer to adulthood. I was baptized at age 14 along with other peers.

There's not necessarily a right or wrong way. We are always on a journey. The point of a major commitment is not to totally understand what you are saying "yes" to, but to let that "yes" determine the course of your life. Who of you who are married really understood what you were signing up for with your marriage vows?

I have no doubt that saying "yes" to Jesus simply means your best yes that you can make wherever you are at in your personal development and growth. As we grow as people, we discover what that "yes" really meant.

One of the biggest challenges to that "yes" is that the church here or elsewhere is human and flawed. We may feel at times like this isn't what we wanted to say "yes" to. People will let us down, and we ourselves let others down, yet the Spirit of Christ is always bigger than what people do.

I thought of an imaginary scenario that relates to baptism.

Imagine you and some others are lost in a cave. You can think of the cave as an unfree and false way of life. You are running out of light, and running out of time to find a way out. After checking numerous side tunnels, the only other way you can see involves going through a narrow tunnel completely submerged in water.

[Slide of cave picture] The photo is my cousin poking his head into a very small tunnel – no water, fortunately. I can swim and I've been in caves before, but the two together don't sound at all fun to me. What would be more horrifying than having to swim through a tunnel where there is no way to breathe? Only keep going and hope there is a way through to the other side.

But imagine one person from your group volunteers to go into the uncharted territory. Minutes pass and you know nothing. Eventually you hear a voice assuring you that this is the way out and back into sunlit land, and the voice promises to guide you all in how to get through the tunnel, and where there is a space to breathe.

Now you know that while the tunnel isn't pleasant, there is a way through. This is what baptism is like. It is identifying with Jesus' journey through death with the trust that the journey ends with new life. In this comparison, the church is the fellowship of people who have passed through that tunnel and are in another space, still in the cave maybe, but we can see light.

Romans 6:4 says: *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

When Paul wrote these words to the church in Rome, he was probably envisioning a baptized person being completely submerged under water, which was like a kind of burial. Of course, we have other word-pictures of baptism, like a cleansing or like exchanging one set of clothes for another. Our confession statement says baptism is a sign of cleansing from sin and also a pledge of a covenant with God and the church. Baptism is a kind of entry point into a connection with Christ as well as being a part of the church.

While baptism is a one-time experience for most Christians, if in fact you were old enough to remember it, we have another embodied practice that we repeat. The practice of the Lord's supper also goes back to the beginnings of the church, remembering the last meal Jesus shared with the disciples.

Our confession statement about the Lord's Supper says that it is a "sign by which the church thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death." We also renew our own covenant with God and one another.

Communion is more than "remembering." It is a spiritual practice that is an embodied way for us to experience the hospitality of Christ's table with Jesus as the host. It is a way that the life of the church is sustained spiritually by the resurrected life of Jesus.

#### SIGN

By using the language of "sign," for both baptism and the Lord's supper, our tradition is saying that these things point to something beyond the act of the ritual. But as flesh and blood humans we need physical, embodied experiences like the feeling of water or the taste of bread and juice to help us experience God's grace in a way that isn't just cerebral.

A sign is not the "real thing." A sign that says "Goessel" on it is not itself the town of Goessel, but is pointing people to where Goessel is.

In the case of baptism, you are not literally dying and rising when you go under the water and come back up. But it points to the spiritual reality of receiving the Holy Spirit and becoming connected with the life of Christ.

These signs of baptism and the Lord's supper are expressions of God's grace. Before we talk about what the church does, or what a life of discipleship might look like, we have to start with God's grace.

Every journey of transformation always starts with grace. We are chosen and accepted as we are *and* have an invitation to freedom and new life.

#### CONCLUSION

Jesus lives on through the church. Once again, the church consists of broken people who trust in the offer of salvation through faith in Jesus. The church proclaims the reign of God as we, empowered by the Holy Spirit, give a foretaste of life in God's kingdom.

In the church, we practice love for one another, but we also exist to serve those outside of our immediate fellowship; We shouldn't expect it to be the other way around. We shouldn't expect to feel superior or to have a privileged position in the broader culture.

Baptism is the sign of passing through death into new life with Christ and is also a rite of entry into the life of the Church

The Lord's supper is a sign of the life of Christ given for us. It is a sign of fellowship and sharing. It is a sign of the spiritual food of Christ in the new resurrected life.

Before focusing on the things we do as a church, we are focusing first on the signs of baptism and communion given us as spiritual practices.

Ask yourself: why am I part of the church? Do I feel this rings true? Or do I feel disillusioned? What would healing and resolution look like? How is God calling me to commit to the life of the church and to sustain my faith?

So let's remember: We are first of all here by the grace of Jesus whose Spirit is alive in and beyond the church.

We are here not to be comfortable, but to be transformed, until we hopefully can taste a new reality that Jesus described in parables and proclaimed.

## BENEDICTION

Rom. 15:5-6 – May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.