

09-04-2022 WORSHIP SERVICE

Good morning! Welcome to this worship service at AMC. We'll take some time out of our Labor Day weekend to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. This is one of the practices that we do together because God asked his people to set aside an appointed time each week to come together for worship. It's a practice that helps us to stay grounded in our faith tradition. This morning we'll be looking at some of the other practices and structures that are included in our Confession of Faith.

What opportunities for celebration and service do you have to share with one another this morning?

The task of educating our children and each other in the Biblical stories and in the tenets of our faith is another practice that we do together and value as the church – a sign of God's reign in the world. This morning we'd like to recognize and offer a blessing to the teachers and the learners among us which, we realize, is ALL of us! So we will offer this prayer of blessing together. Delton will put it up on the screen so we can all see it – This blessing comes from the Shine Faith Formation curriculum that we use for our youngest students. There are parts for one voice, which I will read, and then teachers, children, youth and all of us as we remind ourselves of the significance of Christian education within our mission. The bulletin insert lists everyone who has committed to teach for this 2022-23 school year.

So I invite all of the people listed on the insert to stand and I invite all those who will teach children and youth to come forward – as well as the children and youth themselves to come forward! That includes parents of the youngest students – I invite you to bring your young children up front. The first line that the children read is a question and it's for Middle school and younger. The first line for teachers is for the teachers of those in Middle school and younger students – a response to their question. Then there will be a question for those children and the youth and then a response from their teachers, together. Then further down, the youth have a question and their teachers reply. Then we end, all together.

A Blessing for Teachers and Learners

One: God, you sent Jesus into the world to show us how to live as God's people.

Children: Who will tell us about Jesus?

Teachers: We will tell you about Jesus! We want to share the story of Jesus so that you may choose to love him and follow in his way. As we worship, pray, and share the Bible story, may you be inspired to love Jesus and live like him every day.

All: As we hear and share God's story together, may our hearts be opened to love Jesus.

One: We are all created, known, and loved by God, and each person's faith journey is unique. The Bible offers guidance for this journey, revealing God's work in the world and how to be part of the ongoing story of the people of God.

Children and youth: Who will guide us on this journey of faith?

Teachers: Along with your family and this congregation, we will guide you! We will lead you in practices of prayer and worship that will help you develop a relationship with God that will sustain and encourage you throughout your life. Faith is not only a personal connection to God; it grows within community. We will learn from each other and discern together how to faithfully follow God.

All: As we discern God's will together, may we grow in faith.

One: Beyond these walls lies a hurting world. God, your love transforms us so that we can participate in the healing of that world.

Youth: There are so many problems. Where do we start?

Teachers: As we seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, together we make God's kingdom a reality here and now. We will study God's Word together and talk about how it connects to our lives. We will challenge you to share God's love and peace with everyone you meet.

All: Seeking God's kingdom together, we can change the world.

Amen! You may all be seated – except for Ally and Braxton and their teachers, Pat and Janine... if you four would come here, to the mic, please, we have something for you.

I understand that you're both first graders this year, right? Ally – which school do you go to? And Braxton?

One of the things you'll be learning more about this year, is reading. So we would like to give you Bibles so that as you learn to read more and more, you can have your own Bible to read. These Bibles each have your names inside the cover and they also have a carrying bag that has been hand-sewn with your name on it.

Now, as you both know, the Bible is a big book, so it will probably take you a long time to read it, but it has exciting stories about God and God's people and amazing stories about Jesus! When we read the Bible we learn about God's love and forgiveness – even when people make mistakes (which we all do), we learn about how God sent Jesus into the world to be an example of God's love, an example that we can read and learn about – and then follow. We hope that you'll spend some time reading in your new Bibles and when you come across things you don't understand, that's ok! Feel free to ask questions about it and learn more! You can ask your parents or your grandparents, or your Sunday school teachers or your pastors.

Let's have a prayer together – Loving God, we ask you to bless Allyssa and Braxton and all the other children in our church. Thank you for your love. Help them to know your love for them. Thank you for your promises, including the promise that you will always be with us, and the promise of life through our connection with Jesus. Give Ally and Braxton an awareness of your love, and let them discover you through the words in their Bibles. Amen.

I invite the youth to come, now, and lead us in our Call to Worship.

Let's pray together –

Holy God, you call us together to reflect on your Word and our life in your world.
Be with us now as we sing and pray together,
that we may hear your voice and understand your way.
This we pray through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Prayer of Dedication – please stand

Holy and Loving God, we are grateful for your care and provisions for us. We acknowledge that the earth and all its fullness is yours. We dedicate these offerings of money as we return them to you with love and gratitude. Bless us as we give and bless the gifts that they may used to show your love and mercy. Amen.

Message – How the Church Functions – Pastor Lois

At this point in our study of the articles of the Confession of Faith, we'll begin to look more toward the Epistles for our scripture texts. Of course the Gospels and the texts from the Hebrew Bible continue to be foundational for our faith confessions. But when it comes to creating guidelines and teachings for how to actually BE The Church, we count on Paul and Peter and those whose task it was to pick up the pieces after Jesus was no longer physically present here on earth. Those early church founders had the daunting assignment of organizing, logistics, calling out gifts, calling out false teachers, creating roles and structures – all to try to remain faithful and steadfast to what they had learned from Jesus. But Jesus was gone. He had come and turned the world on its head in only three years – and then he was gone! And they were left, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to figure out what to make of it, how to build on it, how to implement what they had learned, how to maintain the momentum, how to finance it. It was a brand new movement, a new way of living out their faith and, in fact, in those early days they often called themselves followers of The Way. Their lives were forever changed and their divine call was to tell others what Jesus taught them, and to invite folks to join in the movement with them – but they had to have something to invite them into! What would it look like? What would it be called? How would it be done? What would the rules be?

Maybe some of you have heard me say before – Jesus came to bring the kingdom... what he got was the church. I certainly don't mean any disrespect when I say this! It just strikes me as a humorous way to say that it seems likely that the image or the assignment that Jesus had in mind for what he thought he was doing here on earth, didn't quite match up with what actually resulted. After all, we're still waiting and working, still saying the prayer that Jesus taught – your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

So... the four articles that we'll look at today are part of this conversation about how to BE church. How do we function, what are the guidelines, what is the structure that gives us common touch points for our expectations. Another way of expressing this might be, what are the common practices that we've agreed on that we will do together to maintain and grow in our faith?

Caleb started us out with the first two of these practices in last Sunday's sermon when he spoke about baptism and communion; clearly, two practices that Jesus both showed us how to do and mandated that we also do. A third practice that goes along with those first two is foot washing. This is article 13 in the confession. I can't say anything about this practice any more completely or clearly than the way it's recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 13, the first 17 verses: (photo)

13 It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Now, Article 14 is on the practice of discipline in the church. The summary for this article says, "We practice discipline in the church as a sign of God's offer of transforming grace. Discipline is *intended* to *liberate* erring brothers and sisters from sin, and to *restore* them to a right relationship with God and to fellowship in the church. The practice of discipline gives integrity to the church's witness in the world."

Except when it doesn't. Surely article 14 is one of the most difficult to implement well. Let me come at this one from the perspective of what I understand we are NOT to do with discipline in the church.

I understand that discipline is NOT to be used as a spiritual or communal bludgeon, a weapon with which to wound or threaten people. It is to be administered in a spirit of humble gentleness. Galatians 6, verse 1 says, "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness..." Church discipline needs to be offered in a spirit of mutual and pastoral care.

It's also part of my understanding that discipline in the church is not to be used by those who are not confessing, committed members of the church. Church discipline and a process of repentance and restoration can only be welcome and effective within relationship. The kinds of conversations required for speaking the truth in love, genuine listening, the kind of gentle admonition that can lead to a person owning their mistake, repenting of it and being restored to the community – those kinds of conversations can only happen when there are relationships of trust. Those take time, patience and perseverance. If "transforming grace" is the sign we're looking for, the kind of grace that liberates and restores, then we cannot be in a hurry. If we rush and try to force repentance and restoration, we may very well end up with something that looks much more like "cheap grace" as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it, "the grace we bestow on ourselves" rather than the genuine, costly grace that Jesus modeled and taught us.

The third point I'll make about what I understand church discipline NOT to be, is that I think it was not intended to be used to support punishment for our narrow, moralistic fears and angst. Church discipline, I think, should not be used exclusively as a way to shame and shun those who may have committed what we often think of as "moral failings". That is, no doubt, one aspect of church discipline, but it is, perhaps, the laziest, the easiest, the one that can be administered swiftly and clearly, allowing the rest of us to breathe a sigh of relief that we will likely not be disciplined for our greed, our racism, our apathy or our pride. If discipline in the church is to be a sign of God's offer of transforming grace and give integrity to the church's witness in the world then the world needs to be able to clearly see the good news of Jesus in it.

Articles 15 and 16 should sound very familiar to us as they take us directly back to the recent conversations we've been having about the church – why do we need it and how does it work? As we've learned, the church works best when we understand it as a body, and each member is a crucial and valued part. Each one is gifted by God with something the church needs. It's the job of the church to discover which gifts are brought by which members of the body and how to incorporate them in the most joy-filled and life-giving ways.

The early churches in Ephesus and Philippi needed further explanation and encouragement about this, so they received letters offering just that. Two thousand years later, the writers of our Confession of Faith were able to use the exhortation and teaching in these same letters because it still rings true across the centuries.

Christ himself gave all that is needed to equip his people... so that the body of Christ may be built up... into maturity and the fullness of Christ... We will speak the truth in love, we will

grow to become the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

May God bless us as we do our loving work together. (Hymn #390)

It was my oversight that the questions for reflection didn't get changed from last week. I'm interested to hear what questions or reflections you might have and Delton will put up a couple of questions that I came up with on the screen as well.

1. What are things about the institutional structure, the practices for how the church is designed to function, that you have appreciated or found helpful?
2. What are areas in which the church practices could be improved or done differently to help us function more effectively or faithfully?

Benediction – from the last two verses of Ephesians:

Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus. Amen.