

9/11/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome to Alexanderwohl!

It is good to be back here with you. It couldn't be a more beautiful morning. May each of us be blessed in this time of worshiping our Creator in the presence of one another, and seeking inspiration for our discipleship of Jesus.

Some of you will already know this from the church email, but I do want to let you all know the sad news that Gene Hastings passed away peacefully on Friday afternoon. Gene and Cindy were fortunate to have time together in the last days, and also fortunate to have visits from some people who could express what Gene had meant for them. The family invites you to an informal time of visiting in honor of Gene in the Fellowship Hall on Tuesday from 7-9.

At this time, we welcome other announcements or opportunities....

CALL TO WORSHIP

As we center ourselves in worship, let us recall the words of Jesus when he preached from the mountain:

Leader: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

People: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Leader: Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

People: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Leader: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

People: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Leader: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

People: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Leader: Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

People: Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

INVOCATION PRAYER

God,

Our hearts are inspired by Jesus' words pointing to another reality than our day-to-day experience of the world, and to another way of life than the conventional self-serving way of our culture.

Let us know the presence of Christ, and the resolve to follow the way of Christ. Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Loving God, this morning we come to you in prayer with concerns, with grief and with requests and with praises. Not because we think you don't know what's going on in our lives and around the world, but because we trust that you do. We don't bring our prayers to you to inform you, but to take comfort from our faith which tells us that your love is always with us, that through your people we find strength, and that our hope ultimately lies in Jesus.

O God, hear our prayers...

We pray for Cindy Hastings and for family and friends who love her and are grieving Gene's loss with her. Continue to be present with her, Lord, in the coming days and weeks as she tends to details and tries to find a new rhythm for her life.

We pray for our brothers and sisters at Hope Mennonite Church and especially for the family of Dave Stevens as they reel from his untimely and tragic death. Let your Spirit move strongly in their midst as they support one another and find ways to move ahead together.

O God, we pray for Velma Hiebert and we give thanks for her time in the hospital that brought healing and improved health for her. Be with her and Merlin now that they are back at home again. Comfort and strengthen them each day.

Continue to be with Steve and with Sandy Banman as they struggle to return to health from covid and from chemo treatments. May they know your presence and your peace.

God we pray for Gloria Yoder as she has surgery tomorrow. Grant her your peace and comforting presence as well. Thank you for the hopeful reports she has received thus far and for the bond of love and support that Caleb and his sisters and their dad share together. May they all rest in the promise of your love.

Spirit of Peace, fly with your wings of justice and righteousness all around this world. Make your face shine on those who are poor, oppressed, powerless and voiceless. We read that in your kingdom they are blessed. And grant your mercy, Lord, to those who hold and withhold the wealth, the power, and the ability to bring change. For we read that in your kingdom they will be last. We pray for wise and compassionate hearts, for minds and spirits that are open and willing to learn and live the ways of Jesus.

We pray in his name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

For your bounty and your blessings, O Lord, we give thanks. Make us generous as we gratefully return these gifts to you. Give us joy as we offer our lives to you. Amen.

“BUT I SAY TO YOU” – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Matt 5:27-48

INTRODUCTION

For the past number of weeks, we have been looking again at the Mennonite Confession of Faith. The Confession of Faith attempted to summarize the Christian beliefs that describe us and unite us in our differences. It has never functioned as a litmus test, however of who is welcome to be a part of our fellowship.

Two weeks ago, we began the topic of the church, with the two primary practices of baptism and the Lord's supper that represent the new life that we receive by the grace of God.

Then last week, pastor Lois preached on how the church functions, with additional practices that mark us as a distinct body called for a purpose. These include foot washing or service, restorative discipline, spiritual leadership, and unity as one body with many members.

Today, I'll take us through a brief look at another set of topics that have to do with the Christian life: how we as believers and a church find a new way of life because of the gift of God's grace. Because I'll touch on a lot, you are certainly encouraged to read the individual articles of the Confession on your own, if you'd like to go deeper.

Article 17 is about the call to discipleship -- to follow the teachings of Jesus, even when that means risking loss. The next articles each consider different aspects of Christian discipleship. Article 18 is about Christian spirituality, article 19 about marriage and families, and article 20 is about truth-telling.

Next week, we will consider additional aspects of Christian discipleship: stewardship, peacemaking, and our relationship to the world. Even though Megan had to read a pretty long chunk from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this passage includes many of these aspects of discipleship.

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

Article 17 begins, "Through the gift of God's saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life."

So what's a disciple, really? The original meaning of the word is "learner" or "apprentice." Discipleship is apprenticeship in a spiritual path, an alternative way of life.

Discipleship is not something we do in order to be acceptable to God. We are already acceptable to our loving God, as long as we have a bit of humility to recognize our limitations and mistakes and the simple desire to love God and others. We are first invited to receive the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation, and it is that grace that is the foundation for a new life marked by discipleship.

Of course, some people have dramatic conversions and can tell the story of their lives with a distinct before and after. For those of us who have been Christians from childhood, you might not feel like you can point to a "before" and then an abrupt change to "new life."

Without dismissing your past life of faith, we are still challenged to keep your eyes on the goal, and to hold out for a newness of life unlike what you have already experienced.

Many of us know what it's like to be in some sort of intensive training or regimen. Maybe it was a special diet you chose or were recommended. Maybe you have tried a rigorous training plan running or weight-lifting. I can remember having to get up at 4:45 in college for early morning runs, and for some pretty intense circuits in the afternoon.

Maybe you have done intensive leadership or vocational training. Maybe it was a rigorous music program or learning a new skill. Often training happens with a group, such as a team. This gets us a little closer to discipleship, for Jesus directed his teaching at a group of disciples who eventually became the church.

Why do we attempt something that is hard? In some cases, our survival might depend on that hard work. In other cases, that discipline is what allows you to have a truly meaningful pursuit, or have a challenging job that is your vocation.

You accept the hard work, because without it you wouldn't see the fruit.

MATTHEW 5

In Matthew 5, Jesus explains that his aim was not to overturn the Jewish law, but to fulfill it – to reinterpret and redefine it.

We see this in the statements that Jesus makes, each time repeating the phrase: “You have heard that it was said to those of the old days...., but I say to you...”

Jesus' teachings are not challenging because they are legalistic. To be legalistic is to set a kind of minimum bar:

- Don't actually *kill* the person you are angry at.
- Don't actually *have* an affair, even if you fantasize about it.
- *At least* tell the truth when you make a *solemn* vow.
- You can get back at the person who hurt you, but don't do anything *worse* to them than what they did to you.
- *At least* love your family and friends.
- Do what your oppressors *specifically* demand so that you won't be more oppressed than you have to be.

Instead, Jesus' statements are not to be viewed as a different legalistic standard, but rather as a change of attitude so that we will have our hearts in the right place in order to live the true intent of God's will.

It always comes to the heart of what it means to love, and we have to ask again and again what love looks like in our specific situations.

MARRIAGE

In the long section that Megan read, we have several sections based around these reframing statements (“you have heard it was said, but I say”).

The first have to do with marriage. Marriage is a deeply covenantal relationship. Jesus calls all of us to respect the wholistic humanity of each person and we fall short of that whenever we look on another person as an object to bring pleasure to ourselves.

In a patriarchal culture where women were restricted and treated as property, Jesus placed responsibility on men to honor the dignity of women. In his context, Jesus teaching on divorce

aimed to protect women from being sent away by their husbands and left in a precarious situation.

Our understanding of marriage, family relationships, as well as our embrace of single adults should all reflect a focus on covenant relationships. Article 19 of the Confession is the one that has received the most attention, because it gives a traditional understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman.

Hopefully, by now we've gotten a sense of the breadth of the different articles of the Confession. It's clear that in recent years, the question of inclusion of LGBTQ people has caused much division and conflict in the broader church.

Folks who have a more traditional understanding believe that the Bible gives a clear teaching of God's intention for marriage. Many Christians who identify as LGBTQ or who support same gender relationships raise questions about the specific biblical passages upon which a traditional doctrine of marriage is based and quickly move to the bigger themes of inclusion in the Bible and the ministry of Jesus.

This conflict in the church is not going away and article 19 has not settled it. In our own congregation, we have differing views, and yet we are still in fellowship with one another despite this difference.

In church arguments about the Confession of Faith, people don't remember that the same year that the Confession was approved – 1995 – the church also approved a statement called “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.”

“Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” gives guidelines to redemptively work with conflict and breach of trust. It is not specific to doctrinal disagreement, but by being approved at the same time as the Confession, it signals that we believe more in staying in relationship and continuing conversation about our differences rather than emphasizing doctrinal uniformity.

I do think there is a substantial core we can all agree to.

- We can agree to the Bible and careful ethical discernment seriously, as well as listening to people's stories without first filtering the stories through what you already think
- We can agree to support those who feel called to be single. We are often so family-centric that we make it difficult for single people to feel fully welcome and supported.
- We can agree to take seriously the covenantal aspect of our relationships – marriages as well as family relationships, church relationships, and friendships. Covenant means fulfilling one's own desires is not the primary goal.

TRUTH-TELLING

In next section of Matthew 5, Jesus taught to tell the simple truth. Say yes if it's yes and no if it's no. It's telling the truth because whatever the circumstance, we are always in God's presence. We are always called to be trustworthy and follow through on what we promise, whether or not we signed a paper.

Instead of calculating the truth that you need to tell for your self-interest, the higher way is to regard truth-telling in terms of our covenantal relationships with others.

What is the truth that we owe the other? Glen Stassen makes the point that there may be situations where we don't owe the full truth; for example, someone aiding Jewish people during the Holocaust did not owe the full truth to an interrogating official.¹

In another vein, parents tell the truth to their children in ways that are appropriate to the developmental stage of the child.

LOVE OF ENEMIES

After truth-telling, Jesus challenges us followers to respond creatively to oppressors and to love their enemies.

He gives a number of scenarios in which followers creatively apply an unexpected action that steps out of a binary choice between either submitting to the status quo or violently resisting.

For example, a creditor could demand the tunic – essentially the shirt off the back of the indebted person. But the Jewish law said they couldn't take away the outer garment overnight so that a person wouldn't be cold.

Jesus' instruction to give the coat as well sounds like doubly oppressing oneself. But it would also have thoroughly embarrassed the creditor, because now the indebted person is standing naked or nearly naked in front of them.

Likewise, if a Jew offered to walk a second mile carrying the equipment of a Roman soldier, it might have surprised the soldier and given opportunity to humanizing conversation.

Jesus did not teach us to be door mats. He taught followers creative, non-violent responses to injustice.

Glan Stassen recalls the way people in the civil rights movement carried out boycotts and marches, knowing they could go to jail. They did not stay silent or go along with the status quo. They also acted from a motivation of hope and belief in the humanity of everyone, rather than a motivation of rage or despair.²

Jesus calls us to do the unexpected. Instead of escalating conflict, hostility, and violence, we aim to be peacemakers. We aim to break the cycles of violence and act as if we believe in the full humanity of everyone involved.

BEING PERFECT

In my mind, the hardest phrase to understand in the Sermon on the Mount is this: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." What kind of high bar is that? Who can be perfect?

¹ Stassen, Glen H. *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance.*, p. 88

² Ibid, p. 93

The word “perfect,” at least as it sounds to our ears, is a recipe for deluding ourselves into thinking we’ve got it figured out and are better than all those heathen over there.

Or maybe more commonly, Christians dismiss Jesus’ teaching. We’ll go with Paul’s formula of salvation by grace. We assume Jesus gave a perfectionistic standard to show that we can’t earn our salvation. So we will just pray for grace, but otherwise not attempt to live radically different than anyone else. This also feels safer too, because we will often be disappointed when we look for evidence for transformation among people who call themselves Christians.

I think it helps to unpack the meaning of this phrase. The Greek word for “perfect” is derived from *telos*, which means “end,” “completion,” or “goal.”

As a descriptor, the word means “whole,” or “undivided.” It’s helpful to look at back at how Jesus had just been describing God: a God who causes the sun to rise on good and bad people alike, and sends rain on righteous and unrighteous. God has the same love for everyone and so should we. That’s what Jesus is really talking about.

In the parallel passage in Luke, it says “be merciful as your Father is merciful.” Jesus isn’t talking about an impossible, perfectionistic standard. He’s talking about being oriented toward the goal of Christlikeness. He’s talking about consistently showing love to all people rather than just those we consider to be “our” people.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

While Matthew 5 doesn’t directly mention the Holy Spirit, other New Testament passages describe the Spirit not only as a means of hearing God’s voice, but also as God’s power within us to live a new life. Jesus does not call disciples to engage his path on their own, but in company with one another and through the empowerment of the Spirit.

Our Confession states in article 18 on spirituality: “We believe that to be a disciple of Jesus is to know life in the Spirit... We draw the life of the Spirit from Jesus Christ, just as a branch draws life from the vine.” The Confession goes on to describe spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, simplicity, and study of Scripture that help us cultivate a spiritual life that sustains us and helps us avoid burn-out.

I confess that it is hard for me, and I am sure it is hard for all of us, to prioritize the inner spiritual life as much as “doing things.”

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ teachings are not about heroically intervening in every tragedy and somehow saving the world. All of the teachings are centered around relationships with people that we are in contact with. The person you have a broken relationship with; your spouse; the person who insults you; the people you might be tempted to bend the truth with.

Let’s not be content to do the minimum. Let’s allow our imagination to be captivated by radical discipleship. Let’s see what new life we haven’t yet tasted is possible to create among us.

BENEDICTION

(anonymous, VT 1066)

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands
stretch out your hands to serve.

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open your hearts to love.

May you see the face of Christ
in everyone you meet,
and may everyone you meet
see the face of Christ in you.