

9/18/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl, both to those here in this space or watching on Zoom. Summer is clearly back for the next few days.

Yet fall activities are in full swing. We look forward to our retreat at Camp Mennoscah next weekend, where it should be cooler than right now. Our Wednesday afternoon activities begin in just a few weeks including our first fellowship meal.

Today happens to be the International Day of Peace, and in our series, it worked out that the topic of peace fell on this day. The Mennonite World Conference, which is an international body of Anabaptist-related groups has seven articles of shared convictions.

The fifth of these applies well to what we will consider today:

*The Spirit of Jesus empowers us
to trust God in all areas of life,
so we become peacemakers
who renounce violence,
love our enemies,
seek justice,
and share our possessions
with those in need.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

In a worshipful spirit, let us read together the words of the prophet Isaiah printed in your bulletins, who said,

“In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house will be the highest of the mountains. It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it.”

Leader: “Come, let’s go up to the Lord’s mountain,
to the house of Jacob’s God

**People: so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God’s paths.”**

Leader: Instruction will come from Zion; the Lord’s word from Jerusalem.

**People: God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.**

Leader: Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.

***All: Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.***

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God our Redeemer,

Sometimes it is hard to feel at peace.

When we feel unsafe, when we feel uncertainty in different ways, when we feel conflict and a loss of trust in leaders, when we feel grief, or when the church is asleep or rigid, rather than animated by your life-giving Spirit.

You are the one who calmed the stormy sea.

Today, let us remember the peace of Jesus, the peace that you alone can give, and the peace and wholeness we must live out with careful stewardship each day of our lives.

In the name of the Prince of Peace, Amen

MORNING PRAYER - PASTOR LOIS

*a word of celebration - \$2,600 was raised for the MDS cabinet-making shop last Sunday evening at the outdoor concert on-the-lawn!

Loving God, on this day that has been named the International Day of Peace, we come to you in prayer, longing for that to become a reality. We're grateful for the relative peace and calm that we live in, recognizing that many in this world don't have that. We pray for peace in each soul, in each home, in our cities and around this world. We pray for the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan as they struggle to survive. We pray for those in other parts of your world as well where fire and lack of water are becoming increasingly prevalent. We pray for those who don't have enough to eat and we thank you, God, for those who will pray with their feet and their generosity today in the Harvest Giving Walk. May you honor and bless those gifts.

We thank you, God, for the money that was raised last Sunday for the local work of Mennonite Disaster Service through the cabinet-making shop here in Goessel. Thank you for those who are praying with their hands and their time in that project as well as for those who organized and sang and played music and made and enjoyed ice cream and fellowship – for all who are coming together in that work. It is a beautiful example of your people working together for good!

Another example we can see and give thanks for is those who give their time to teach. This morning we especially honor and think of those who teach Sunday school here at Alexanderwohl as well as those who serve on the Board of Christian Education. We ask, God, that you would continue to bless the teachers and all who serve by giving their time to ensure that as a congregation we keep learning about you and about Jesus and how to live by his examples.

We ask for your blessing, God, on the upcoming mid-week meals, classes and activities. We trust that you will provide all that is needed for those important times of learning and fellowship.

Thank you, God, for the gift of new life and for the safe passage of Neil Thomas in our family. We give you praise for this miracle.

Gracious God, we continue to hold Cindy Hastings in prayer to you. We ask for comfort in her grief and for guidance as she learns how to move ahead now with her life. Surround her with your love in the days and weeks to come. We pray for all who are grieving – that your Spirit would provide what is needed.

We pray for those who are sick, O God. We pray especially for those who live and work at Bethesda, at Kidron-Bethel, Schowalter Villa and other care facilities who are battling covid and other illnesses. Thank you, God, for the sheer determination and commitment of those who are steadfast in their care for the residents. Continue to uphold them, give them strength and compassion.

We continue to pray for Steve and Sandy in these difficult times of on-going illness. Thank you, God, for the healing from covid they have both experienced. We ask for continued comfort and healing for Steve. Be with the doctors – help them to be attentive and to fully use their training and know-how for Steve’s benefit. Be with Sandy as she continues in her care-giving. Be also with Craig and with Allison and with extended family. Be with us as their friends and congregation as we all come around Steve and Sandy to support them.

Bless us, God, as we worship. Be present with your Holy Spirit as we hear your words and receive reminders of how to live each day in ways that honor and praise you, our Creator. Hear us now as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught... Our Father, who art in heaven...

A MAP OF TRANSFORMATION – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Romans 12:1-2, 9-16

We are getting near the end of the articles of the Confession of Faith. Today’s topics include Stewardship, Peace, and the church’s relationship to the government or world.

All of these are aspects of Christian discipleship. They are more connected than it might seem at first glance. The best passage I could think of that spoke to all of these themes in some way is the 12th chapter of Romans. The entire chapter is applicable even though we skipped some verses.

The very first verses we have heard many times. My own association is with a mural that used to exist at my high school based on Romans 12:1 and 2, with the words “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The apostle Paul wrote to a multiple small house churches scattered in the city of Rome. Romans 12 is the turning point in the letter, when Paul transitions from a long explanation of his gospel to its applications in the lives and character of the small Jesus-assemblies.

Paul urges them to offer, not burnt animal sacrifices, but the metaphorical offering of their own lives, their very selves. This is the truest and most fitting form of worship, rather than offering something that is a substitute for our full selves.

Instead of patterning our lives the way most people of our time do, we are **transformed** – the word in Greek is metamorphosis – by the renewal of our minds and hearts. The traditional word would be repentance, which starts with a change of the mind.

MAP OF TRANSFORMATION

So, my title here is a “map of transformation.” What do I mean by that?

A map depicts the features, landmarks, and terrain of a place, allowing us to navigate that place and make our way to our desired destination.

The whole chapter of Romans 12 is giving a kind of topographical map of a community that has found the transformation – the metamorphosis – described in the first verses.

Often, we appreciate maps the most when we don’t have them.

When I was in college, I had a semester abroad in Spain. While I travelled around some with other students from my school, I also had some money that was a gift from my grandfather.

[SLIDE: BARCELONA]

I decided that I really wanted to see Barcelona, mostly because of the architecture, and set out to do that just by myself for a couple of days. I was clear in the opposite corner of Spain. I could take a train to Seville and fly to Barcelona.

By the time I reserved a flight and a hostel, it was already feeling like too much money, so I pinched every remaining penny. In Barcelona I walked everywhere and subsisted off of fresh baguette bread and apples those couple of days. After two days, I flew back to Seville and had a three-hour window before the train left from downtown Seville for the city where I was studying.

The bus ride from the train station to the airport had seemed like a short straight jaunt, and the 4-euro fare felt overpriced for the distance. So why not just walk and save the 4 euros? I had three hours. How hard could it be?

[SLIDE: MAP]

No, I did not have a map, except for a little street map of the city center inside a guidebook. But surely all I would have to do would be to follow street signs pointing to downtown and once I was close, I’d find myself on the map.

It turned out to be much harder than I thought. Roads didn’t go straight, and there weren’t the signs pointing in the direction of downtown like I thought. Several times, I tried without luck to locate myself on the tiny map I did possess. Plus, walking in the hot Seville sun beside some busy roads had left me so hungry I had to splurge at least 4 euros on a sandwich.

I did manage to make it to the train station with about 5 minutes to spare. I might have set aside my introversion and pride to ask a few people to point me in the right direction.

[SLIDE: OUTLINE OF ROMANS]

So what are a few features of the map of transformation in Romans 12?

The remainder of the chapter has roughly three sections. The **first** of these describes the nature of the church – a topic we have already talked about in previous weeks.

The primary aspect of the church's character here is humility. It's not a competition for who can be the greatest, but a humble sharing of the diverse gifts that different people have.

A similar passage in 1 Peter calls this stewardship: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

The article on Stewardship in our Confession of Faith says that God "calls us as the church to live as faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us."

Steward is not a word much used anymore. I imagine that the royal family has plenty of stewards and servants. It's essentially a person who is not the owner, but takes care of something on behalf of the owner.

This caretaking certainly includes how we use our money and possessions. It also includes our time, the earth and its resources and well-being, and finally the gifts and abilities each of us has to offer for the benefit of others.

The **second** part of the map of transformation (verses 9-13) is a Paul's description of love. Paul begins by saying that love must be authentic – the opposite of hypocrisy or pretending.

Nothing super heroic is required here. It is better to live an ordinary life of genuine kindness than to put on a front or appearance of being a more loving person than you really are.

To some extent, we all do that without realizing it. Our feelings of shame, and the social pressure to be "acceptable" to others encourages us to have a "public self" that is not always transparent of our own struggles, flaws, or shortcomings.

Finally, the **third** part of Romans 12, verses 14-21 has commands based on what it is to live at peace with each other. It is true that this might begin within relationships in the churches, but there's no reason to think that Paul's commands don't extend to all relationships in general.

Paul's words, like Jesus, are not theoretical. They are not outlining an ideology or policy platform. They are about how we are to behave in our concrete flesh and blood relationships. And only if you have had the experience of being deeply hurt, with a reason to distrust or take revenge, do you know how hard these words are.

Paul surely knew psalms that curse enemies. Yet much like Jesus who said, "you have heard it was said, but I tell you," Paul encourages the higher road of asking God to bless enemies.

We come back to humility with this encouragement: “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are” (NRSV).

Paul is telling the communities to make their concern be for the good of one another rather than one’s own ambitions for advancement. The pattern of this world is to associate with people who are like you or who have the standard of living or success that you wish for.

Associate with people of low position is radical. How many of us have close friends who are struggling, who are at the margins of society? These aren’t random commands unrelated to each other. It’s all connected. Peace, forgiveness, and letting go of the desire of revenge is connected to humility.

The South African church leader Desmond Tutu observed that “We are able to forgive because we are able to recognize our shared humanity... A human life is a great mixture of goodness, beauty, cruelty, heartbreak, indifference, love, and so much more.”

We have to be able to see that mixture both in those who upset us and in ourselves. Desmond Tutu’s own capacity to forgive those who were members of the white ruling class that upheld apartheid was his capacity to realize that under the same circumstances and pressures, he himself might have acted the same way.

This is hard inner work that impacts our external world. Our Confession of Faith calls us to work for justice without violence. The example of Jesus is hard to follow, because Jesus was willing to risk persecution and threat.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD

When it comes to our relationship with the world, as well as with our country, we recognize that the church includes people from across the world in every people group.

We are not after Christian supremacy, or somehow forcing or twisting the arms of people in the world to adopt the Christian way, much less shower privilege and accolades on Christians.

Unfortunately, our faith has an ugly history of colonialism, violence, and domination. It is difficult to see the gospel clearly with that baggage we have inherited. We were raised to expect the communities in which we live to be largely Christian, and to function according to our values.

But the call of the writings of Paul and the New Testament in general, at least as the Anabaptist perspective has seen it, is to form alternative communities that in the words of Cesar Garcia, “demonstrate to the world a lifestyle worth imitating.”

Peace is not just one thing. It is more than getting along with our family and community. It is more than a political position you take, or avoidance of roles that involve the use of violence. Being at peace with all people – as far as it depends on us, which Paul is wise to add – is a way of life and a posture of being *for* the world, though not of the world.

Traditionally we talk about being “in the world, but not of the world.” Just as you can’t claim to have visited a place where you have only had a layover, being “in the world, but not of it,” sounds like we are mostly self-preoccupied, enduring a few years in a scary world before we expect to be whisked away to heaven. Who cares if the world burns (whether on judgment day or in abnormal wildfires)?

But to be “for the world” means that we live out an alternative way with the full desire to be a blessing to the world. In God’s letter to the exiles in Babylon through the prophet Jeremiah, we read, “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Today we only have time to consider a few features of this map of transformation. The map is much more detailed. Many of you have seen topographical maps that include a high level of detail. One can spend hours learning about the landscape, even a landscape you have seen with your eyes.

So too, let us commit to studying transformation. Studying the way of peace and the things that make for peace.

Let us practice seeing our own faults, and committing to being on a journey of healing when others have hurt us. Let us commit to mindfulness for how our actions foster or do not foster peace with others. Not the false peace of conflict-avoidance, but the peace of honoring the humanity of each person.

Let us commit to believing that God’s Spirit is indeed at work for justice, righting of wrongs, and transformation where we least expect it.

BENEDICTION

As a closing blessing, I will read from Isaiah 11, ancient words that give vivid and yet unfulfilled images of a world with peace:

*6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.*

*7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*

*8 The infant will play near the cobra’s den,
the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest.*

*9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*
(Isaiah 11:6–9 (NIV))