

09-07-25 Words of Worship

Morning Prayer

O God, we thank you for all who work in this world for peace with justice – who create spaces where your righteousness and justice can kiss as the writer of Psalm 85 imagined. We pray for your guidance and blessing on those who work with Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations with “boots on the ground” working for peace. Give them hope and perseverance. We are grateful, God, for Jim and Ly and their inspirational peace witness in Viet Nam and here and other places in the world. Continue to bless them with conviction, clarity and courage.

There are tragic and horrid circumstances in many places in our world, God. You know about each one and each person who suffers. We pray for your world and this morning we pray particularly for those in Afghanistan who are reeling from recent earthquakes and the destruction in their wake. We pray for others who are struggling with disasters brought by changes in the climate. We pray for those who are suffering in the midst of violence – in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Sudan and the DRC. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayers. We long for your peace.

We pray for those who are grieving losses – of loved ones, of hopes or expectations. Be with ElRoy as he grieves his brother Bob. Be with him and Loretta and their family as they gather later in the month to remember and celebrate Bob's life.

We're grateful, God, for wonderful reasons to celebrate this morning – for the commitment that Heath and Iris made to one another yesterday at their wedding celebration. Bless them on this new adventure together. And we're grateful for Aida and Jayley and Malea as they make their confessions of faith and join with us in this congregation. Grant them joy in this step and grant us deep commitment to them and to one another as we strive to be your faithful people.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's worship now by offering God our gifts and tithes.

Offering prayer – All that we have has been granted by your hand, O God. May we be generous and joyful as we give back to you – our money, our time, our commitments and our faithful service to you. Amen.

Celebration of Baptism and Membership

Aida and Jayley were both part of the Faith Ex class this past spring and since neither of them were graduating there was no pressure to have their baptisms earlier. So this is the date that worked for both of them to celebrate their baptism!

The decision to be baptized is an external and public sign of an internal and personal decision and commitment. Aida and Jayley have already committed to following Jesus in their lives. And so now this ritual with water is the way we make that inward, private decision and outward, public statement!

Scripture tells us that baptism isn't just an individual matter. It makes a person part of the body of Christ. Because we have a spiritual connection to Christ, we also have a spiritual connection to one another, with the mandate to act as Christ's hands and feet in the world.

So, Aida and Jayley, because you have both requested to receive the sign of baptism as a public expression of your faith, I invite you both to join me here – knowing that The Holy Spirit is with you and that you have the support of this congregation.

Jayley and Aida,

- Do you believe in God, the Creator, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life? (I do.)
- Do you renounce the evil powers of this world and turn to Jesus Christ as your Savior? Do you put your trust in his grace and love – and promise to obey him as your Lord?
- Do you accept the Word of God as guide and authority in your life?
- Are you willing to give and receive counsel in this congregation? (I am)
- Will you live without giving in to violence – resisting what is evil and taking risks for what is good? (I will)
- Are you ready to participate in the mission of the church? (I am)

Malea Hartvickson was baptized in the 7th grade at the Lutheran Church in Wilford, ND. She joins us today upon her statement of faith...

Prayer

Faithful God, we pray for Aida, Jayley and Malea who have made public their intention to follow Jesus in the company of this congregation. We thank you for their commitment and we ask for your guidance as they continue to journey in their faith. Be with them in their questioning, in their doubting, and in their wondering. Be with them in their confidence, in their desires and their hopes. Be with us all as we discern our common life and guide our counsel. Open us to faith as it grows in ways both familiar and new so that we may journey together as your beloved children. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who prayed that we might be one by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sing "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus", VT 443 and **read covenant**, VT 932

Reflection – Pastor Lois Harder

What is the Church to BE? Romans 6:1-4; Acts 11:1-18

Aida, Jayley and Malea... you have just pledged yourselves to one of the most amazing, beautiful, sometimes heartbreaking and difficult enterprises that there is. You have joined The Church – the body of Christ. Welcome. We are a weird and wonderful bunch! Does anybody remember the Steve Miller band – from back in the '70's? They sang a song about being pickers and gridders, lovers and sinners. Yep – that's us...ALL of us.

Nearly a couple thousand years ago Paul-the-Apostle and Peter-the-Rock were already trying to get this idea across. As Paul wrote to the young church in Rome and Peter gave witness to the outlandish, Spirit-filled vision he had, they were both trying to articulate what it meant to be part

of the faithful, Jesus-following Beloved community. They were trying to give organization to the newly formed followers of The Way. They were trying to explain that this ritual of baptism is a sort of “acting out”, a dramatization of what *we* do when we catch a glimpse of what Jesus did.

He arrived under the most unlikely circumstances – the child of an unwed teenage mother and a poor, struggling day laborer, trying to do the right thing. They were people of color, from a town that might have been called some kind of nasty hole by those who weren’t from there. There was a tyrant in power when Jesus was born, so he and his family ended up as refugees looking for safety and survival.

When he grew up he went around telling stories trying to help people understand and remember and DO the things he was teaching. Because what he was teaching was hard; hard to understand, first, and really hard to do – it was all so counter-cultural and upside down... often just the opposite of the “conventional wisdom” or the cultural mores. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that Jesus’ teachings were “calls to radical self-sacrificial and compassionate service to humanity....”

And what you three have just pledged and what we all just pledged back to you is contained in those stories that Jesus told and the actions that he took. So let’s just review a little bit, the words we just spoke – the same words we speak each time we witness baptisms and welcome people into our church. What does it all mean?

First, we pledged to bear each other’s burdens...

We do this in important ways when we take time to listen carefully to one another. When we don’t make assumptions about what may or may not be going on in each other’s lives, but have established trusting relationships and can genuinely inquire, “Are you alright? I haven’t seen you for awhile – I’ve missed you.” When we bear one another’s burdens, we pray with and for each other and we also offer to spend time helping, visiting, bringing a meal, offering a ride... whatever ways we can be helpful.

But for Jesus it wasn’t enough to bear the burdens of those we know and trust. He asked us to bear the burdens of people we don’t know, of people we don’t like or are afraid of. Jesus told the story of the Samaritan who stopped to help the injured Judean on a dangerous road, when he knew full-well the potential risk he was taking – not just because the road was known to be dangerous, but also because it was in “enemy territory” where the people who lived there were different, scary, long-standing “others” who could not be trusted.

Jesus challenged his followers to bear each others’ burdens – and the burdens of the “other” who is unknown and unfamiliar. The challenge is for us, as individuals as well as for us corporately to bear the others’ burdens.

This happens when our Board of Mission and Service helps us to organize the “Love Your Community” day like the one coming up at the end of the month. Or when they ask for a group of people to go into Wichita to help with food distribution or gather items for the International Rescue Committee as they help to resettle immigrants. The Church is to be a group of people who help bear others’ burdens.

We promised to assist in times of need...

Part of what makes this promise so hard is that none of us want to acknowledge that we *have* times of need. I can’t count the number of times when I’ve asked, “Could the church assist

you?” and the response is, “Oh, no... I’m sure there are others who need help much more than I.” I’m never quite sure how people are so certain of that, but it’s a very common theme. It seems that sometimes there’s a surplus of pride that makes it really difficult to receive assistance.

We might be able to learn something of value here from the Canaanite woman. Again – she was “other”, different, definitely NOT a member of the community. But she needed assistance and she knew it. Her daughter was tormented by a demon and she was desperate for help. Jesus initially told her he couldn’t help her because she wasn’t Jewish. She humbled herself and fell to her knees, risking everything and courageously making the self-deprecating point that “...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Jesus changed his mind, exclaimed at her great faith and healed her daughter.

I hope we don’t wait until we’re quite as desperate as she! Nevertheless, we covenant to give – and receive assistance in times of need.

We say that we will share our gifts and possessions...

Jesus had quite an experience for us to consider on this topic! A man came to Jesus asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. After they reviewed the ten commandments and the man confidently assured Jesus that he had kept them all, Jesus told him that all he had left to do then was to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. The man went away, grieving and sad because he had a LOT of stuff. Jesus made it clear that the only way for us humans to truly share our gifts and possessions is to trust God. It’s impossible for us to do it, but with God’s help, we can.

Each Sunday when we gather for worship, part of our time together is spent giving our money. When we pray a blessing on that money, we often include a prayer that reminds us that it isn’t ONLY our money that we give, but we give our time, our energy, our giftedness (the things God has made us good at)... Jesus challenged us to prioritize giving everything first to God. We promise to share our gifts and possessions. Lord, help us.

With the words we just spoke, we covenant to forgive as Christ has forgiven...

Jesus told a terrifying story about this. “... There was a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’ Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt. When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. The master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ The master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. And Jesus said, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

In our Anabaptist Mennonite tradition, our challenge might be a little more steep on this one than some, because we don't have priests that we can go and confess to. Sometimes it seems like that might ease the pressure on this forgiveness promise. But priest or no priest, Jesus challenged his followers to forgive – as we've been forgiven. The church is to be a place where we are honest in owning our sins... the ways we've hurt others – just like the first servant had to own the pain he had caused his fellow servant. Then the forgiveness can come.

We promise to support each other – in times of joy and sorrow...

Here I think of the story of Jesus with his friends Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. They had shared joyful times together, meals and lessons, stories and experiences. And then Lazarus got sick. Mary and Martha sent for Jesus, but he waited two more days to come. By the time he got there, Lazarus had died and had been in the tomb for four days already. Both sisters must've had a pretty honest, "shoot from the hip" relationship with Jesus because the Gospel of John tells us that they both, independently, said to him "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And when Jesus saw Mary weeping, he also wept. Ultimately, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead – and we can presume that he, once again, shared in Mary and Martha's joy. The Beloved community is to be a place where we support each other and share deeply in one another's joys and sorrows.

Finally, we pledge that in all things we will work for the common good...

As Jesus was teaching and preaching, huge crowds of people gathered to hear. As people do, they got hungry and needed something to eat. The disciples' reasonable solution was to dismiss everybody and tell them to go find something to eat. But Jesus' challenge was for the disciples to be resourceful, think outside the box, and have faith. This act of faithfulness is not meant to be a magic trick. It IS to care for the common good of all, but it is also to proclaim the presence of Christ among us so that our faithful lives may glorify God. The church is to be a place where there is vision and creative thinking, where people are cared for, where the presence of Christ is proclaimed and God is glorified.

These are not just nice words that the people on the hymnal committee dreamed up. These are words that come from the lessons of Jesus. They are descriptions of what we understand Jesus calls us to do and to be. May the Holy Spirit make us one body, part of the church worldwide, united in its diversity, now and in every age. Amen.

Benediction – VT #1055

Go, knowing you are beloved by God.

Go, praising God for the good news in Jesus Christ.

Go, living the message of God's grace, peace, and love. Amen.