

Order of Service for October 18, 2020 - Pentecost 20

GATHERING

Gathering Song - 526, God is Here

God is here! As we your people meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us, all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit into open minds and hearts.

Lord of all, of church and kingdom, in an age of change and doubt,
keep us faithful to the gospel; help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication, all we have to give, receive;
we, who cannot live without you, we adore you! We believe!

(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)

Greeting

P - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.
C - And also with you.

Kyrie

P - God our Creator, no one can see your face and live, yet you have created us in your
image. Lord, have mercy.
C - Lord, have mercy.
P - God our Saviour, our lives are full of contradictions, yet you come to us in love. Christ,
have mercy.
C - Christ, have mercy.
P - God our guide, we cannot even measure up to our *own* standards, yet you have chosen
us to proclaim your salvation. Lord, have mercy.
C - Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Day

P - The Lord be with you.
C - And also with you.
P - Let us pray. Sovereign God, raise your throne in our hearts. Created by you, let us live
in your image; created *for* you, let us act for your glory; redeemed *by* you, let us give
you what is yours, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.
C - Amen.

WORD

Hebrew Scriptures Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you
have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by
name, and you have also found favour in my sight." Now if I have found favour in your
sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider

too that this nation is your people.’ God said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And Moses said to God, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’

The Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.’ Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’ And God said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The Lord”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But’, he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ And the Lord continued, ‘See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’

The word of the Lord.

Gospel Acclamation

P - Alleluia. Shine like stars in the world,

C - Holding fast to the word of life. Alleluia.

Gospel Reading Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

I don’t know about you, but in the church in which I grew up, there were some people who were deathly afraid of questions. Not necessarily *all* questions, of course. But there were certain areas which just not to be addressed.

We could ask things like, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” Or, “How long did Abraham live?” Or, “Where are some verses in the Bible which will prove that we (Lutherans, Christians, whatever) are right, and someone else (a different denomination, a different religion, whatever) is wrong?”

But there were questions we could not ask. Like, “Why aren’t dinosaurs in the Bible?” Or, “Do we have to believe that Jonah was actually swallowed by a great fish?” Or, “Why can’t we use a more up-to-date version of the Lord’s Prayer?” Or even, “What if I can’t believe anymore?”

Maybe for you, these questions didn't raise anyone's hackles, and that's fine! In my church, they *did* raise hackles. And I suspect that *some* of that hesitation to ask these kinds of probing questions was due, in part, to the way that today's gospel story was described.

We are told, right away, that the people who approached Jesus with questions had ulterior motives. *The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*

They were not just asking questions to generate discussion. They were not asking because they were curious. They were not asking because that were wrestling with some serious issue and wanted his input.

They had an agenda. They were trying to trap Jesus, to make him look foolish, and to get him to say something that would get him in trouble with the powers that be.

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

And the way Jesus responded to these questioners shows that A) Jesus knew all about their ulterior motives, and B) ended up showing that *they* were actually the ones who were trapped, and demonstrating, in a very public way, what kind of hypocrites they really were.

I can't help but think that, for at least some of the good people in the church in which I grew up, they interpreted *every* question as an attempt to trap someone. Every question was viewed with suspicion, and every questioner was treated as, at least potentially, a trouble maker.

Now. You know as well as I do that people who hide from questions like that are saying much more about themselves than they are saying about the question, or the questioner. If you come to me and ask, "Do we have to believe that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish?", and I respond with, "How dare you even ask that question! You obviously have no faith in God, or in God's inspired Word. Get down on your knees tonight and repent, and ask God to guide you back to the truth!"; if I respond that way, I'm not saying anything about you, or your question, or your faith, or the Bible, or God, or even about Jonah! By responding that way, I'm telling you bucket loads about *myself*, about my *own* insecurity, about my *own* fear.

By responding that way, I'm telling you, "Don't ask me that kind of question, because it makes me uncomfortable, and since I don't like feeling uncomfortable, I will try anything to make you go away." I'm also saying, "Don't ask me such things, because I don't want to think that hard!" Or, maybe even more honestly, I'm telling you, "I don't want to think that *differently*."

And if I feel uncomfortably challenged already, you can begin to understand why I would read this story about Jesus as a warning against asking *any* questions. I don't think the story actually says that! But we can perhaps comprehend why someone would *want* to read it that way.

Which is why I think it is so helpful for us to pay attention to the reading from Exodus.

Moses is having an amazing conversation with God. He asks God all kinds of questions, and God actually welcomes them. In fact, it seems that God is , glad, *delighted* even, that Moses is asking these questions!

Moses said , "You have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not told me which ones you mean. You have said, "You have found favour in my sight." But how am I going to know that? And what does that mean, anyway?"

God said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

Moses responded, 'That's a nice sounding promise, but if you're not going to tell us what that looks like, don't bother saying it.'

The Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'

Moses said, 'Show yourself to me.' And God said, 'You don't need to see my face. But I will give you my name, so you may know exactly who I am. And who I Am is the One who has grace and mercy.'

When we engage in honest discussion, and ask honest questions, we learn stuff. Moses engaged in an honest discussion with God, and learned God's name. He learned that God's self-understanding is about being gracious and merciful. He learned that God desires to be close to God's people.

But Moses *also* learned stuff about *himself*. He learned that he was beloved, as was his community. He learned that God was with him, and would lead him; as God was with his community and would guide *them*. He learned that the most faithful way to respond to this grace and mercy was to share them with his community, even if they drove him crazy on a fairly regular basis!

But here's the thing. Those folks who asked Jesus those agenda-laden, misleading, trap attempting questions *also* learned stuff about themselves. Which is what happens when we engage in conversation with Jesus.

They learned that their games were pretty transparent. They learned that they were not nearly as subtle or clever as they thought they were. They learned that their secrets and their plots didn't make them smart; they made them hypocritical. And they *also* learned... that they didn't want to learn these things about themselves.

Now let's be fair. *None* of us wants to learn these things about ourselves! *None* of us wants to go there. But that is where God takes us.

And I can't help but feel that this is where we are being called to go in the middle of this pandemic, because Covid-19 has forced us to ask a whole bunch of questions. And when we ask question, God has a way of showing up and engaging us in a conversation in which, God hopes, we will learn some stuff. But the stuff we need to learn, as followers of Jesus, is probably not revealed by questions like: Who really started this? Who can we blame? How long do we have to wear these blinking masks? When will a vaccine be available? Why should I following the rules when so many others aren't? And everyone's favourite, Which restrictions don't apply to me?

But there *are* some perhaps more *honest* questions, which might help us learn some stuff about ourselves. Questions like, Why do I resent wearing a mask so much? Why can I only think about my inconvenience when so many are really suffering? Why do I only hear what I want to hear? Why do I feel that I can ignore public health warnings and restrictions?

And for our purposes as a congregation, perhaps we need to be asking: Why are we only looking to "get back to normal?" Why are we not seeing new possibilities? Perhaps also, Why are we not even *looking* for new possibilities?

Wrestling with these painful questions, and wrestling the potentially painful answers *to* these questions about ourselves is *one* of, if not *the*, most difficult things we are called to do in life. And many times we decide not to go there. It's too painful, too threatening.

But these stories about the conversation of Moses with God, and even the less-than-genuine conversation the leaders had with Jesus, remind us that we can learn from these encounters. We can learn about life, about faith, about God, but especially about ourselves.

We learn that we have issues.

We learn that we have issues *within* our issues!

We learn that we are a mess!

We may discover that we are like those people in my early congregation who run away from anything that smells like a question! Which will be an important insight, even if it stings.

But it is also possible that we will learn, or perhaps re-learn, God's name; that God's self-understanding is about being gracious and merciful: that God is in fact close to us, close to *all* of God's people, no matter how many question we raise, no matter how many questions we avoid.

We are free to ask questions, because, let's face it, most of the time it's not about the answer! It's about learning, and growing, and becoming more the people who reflect the grace and mercy of God, whose self-description is "I AM grace and mercy." It's about following the Jesus who will show us when we are asking self-serving questions, who will help us discover difficult truths about ourselves, and who will not abandon us in the process. It's about the difficult but life-giving journey of discovering humility, even if we never discover why dinosaurs aren't in the Bible!

Amen.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD

Hymn of the Day - 713, O God of Every Nation

O God of ev'ry nation, of ev'ry race and land,
redeem your whole creation with your almighty hand;
where hate and fear divide us and bitter threats are hurled,
in love and mercy guide us and heal our strife-torn world.

Keep bright in us the vision of days when war shall cease,
when hatred and division give way to love and peace,
till dawns the morning glorious when truth and love shall reign,
and Christ shall rule victorious o'er all the world's domain.

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Prayers of the People

We offer our prayers to God, trusting that we will be heard, and trusting that God will open our ears as well.

[Short pause]

Gracious and merciful One, you welcome our questions, yet we are frequently afraid of them. Free us from our fear. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

Gracious and merciful One, you accompany us in all our difficult journeys. Help us embrace the deeper realities of our lives. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

Gracious and merciful One, our anxiety is real. Enable us to trust your presence even in the middle of our worry. May your love for us inspire a deeper faith. God who is with us,
C - Hear our prayer.

Gracious and merciful One, you call your church to engage the difficulties of our present moment. Strengthen us to be open to the challenges we face, knowing that we are not alone. God who is with us,
C - Hear our prayer.

Gracious and merciful One, you are found in the difficult corners of life: in illness, in loneliness, in poverty, even in death. Use us to touch those whom we name before you with your healing love.

[Long pause]

God who is with us,
C - Hear our prayer.

Gracious and merciful One, in the midst of our questions, in the midst of our *avoiding* our questions, come to us. Open our eyes; open our ears; open our hearts. God who is with us,
C - Hear our prayer.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus, who continues to teach us to pray,

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

SENDING

Benediction

P - May almighty God,
The Father who created us to live in love,
The Son (†) who died and rose to bring us new life,
And the Spirit who is graciously merciful,
bless us all, now and forever.
C - Amen.

Sending Song - 825, You Servants of God

You servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name, all-victorious, of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious and rules over all!

Then let us adore and give him his right,
all glory and pow'r and wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing, with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing, and infinite love!

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Please remember to support our ministry with your offerings. These can be mailed to the church at any time.

Dismissal

P - Go in peace. All questions welcomed.

C - Thanks be to God!