

New Scotland Presbyterian Church
Worship for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
(video link at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>)
August 16, 2020
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

“Seek Ye First”

Ryan Dwyer

Introduction

Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church. The flowers on the pulpit are given to the glory of God by the Dwyers. Thank you!

Call to Worship

from Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us. May God’s face shine upon us so God’s way will be known on earth and God’s saving power among all nations. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy. Let the people praise you, O God, let all the people praise you.

Hymn

Choir

“My Faith Looks Up to Thee” verses 1, 2, 3 #383 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you are the powerful creator of the universe, yet you know us by name. You are the ground of all being, yet you choose to dwell among us. You are the eternal one, yet you are present in this very moment. Call us by name, be present with us as we center our attention on you. Guide us away from fear and despair. Help us when we are losing hope and wallowing in worry. Encourage us with your promise that you are with us always, that your reign has come to earth in the person of Jesus our Savior, that in his resurrection your power defeated evil and sin and death, and that nothing can separate us from your love. Renew and enlarge our hope. Help us to see your hand at work in the world, guiding us to wholeness, and tending to us with love. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Sisters and Brothers in Christ: scripture says, do not worry about anything but bring everything to God; and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. God loves us, heals us, and offers us the grace we need for new beginnings. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson Genesis 45:1-15

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Kids’ Time

For those unable to see the video, the children’s sermon is the story of Joseph and his brothers. They sold him into slavery, but years later he became second in command in Pharaoh’s empire. When the brothers came to Egypt to buy food during a famine, Joseph was able to forgive them and they became a family again. God can work in our hearts to help us forgive people who have hurt us. Now it’s time to see the photos that remind us of God’s love and hope and joy. { photos.}

Keep sending us your photos so we can share them in the coming weeks!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving us family and friends who love us. Help us, when we hurt someone, to say we are sorry; and help us to forgive people when they hurt our feelings. Help us to listen for your word every day and give us hearts like Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

Song

“Just a Little Talk with Jesus”

Choir

Gospel Lesson Matthew 15:1-28

¹ Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. ⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ ‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon

The ways of God are mysterious. And the providence of God unfolds over the span of time. In today’s scripture readings, we see that the hand of God acts through time, and in spite of time, and God acts in ways that we do not always understand. So often we want God to swoop down and fix things right now. And, if we do not get what we want, we can become discouraged, and may even decide that God is not listening to our prayers, or maybe is refusing to give us what we believe is right. And yet, in the fullness of time, we sometimes learn that God was working after all – just not in ways that we wanted or expected. That is what we find in this morning’s scripture readings.

We heard the story of how God was working throughout Joseph’s life, in the Old Testament lesson, but I left out some of the more difficult episodes. Like the reason he ended up in jail was because his master’s wife decided to seduce Joseph, and, when he refused, she told her husband that Joseph had tried to seduce her! So Joseph was sent off to prison. And when Joseph’s brothers showed up in Egypt, wanting to buy food, Joseph did not tell them right away that he recognized them. Instead, he sold them some food, but told them that they had to bring the youngest brother, Benjamin, back to him. And he kept one of the other brothers as insurance that they would.

When they finally returned, Joseph threw a banquet for them, and sold them more food, but, as they packed up for their journey home, Joseph had one of his servants plant a silver cup in Benjamin's belongings. As they were traveling home, one of Pharaoh's officials came after them, and accused them of stealing the silver cup. The brothers of course knew nothing about it, and opened their packs, and the cup was found in Benjamin's bag.

So the brothers returned to Egypt to face the charge of stealing. And Joseph said that he would keep Benjamin as his slave, and the other brothers were free to go. But, the other brothers asked if they might take Benjamin's place, because they knew their father would die of a broken heart if his youngest son did not return home.

And we heard the emotional end—where Joseph finally reveals that he is the brother they sold into slavery all those years ago, and forgives his brothers, and asks them to bring all their families to Egypt to live and be safe through the famine.

Now, honestly, does this sound like the way we expect God to act – with false accusations, manipulation, slavery, and prison? Joseph was 17 years old when his brothers got rid of him, and about 39 when they were finally reconciled. That is 22 long years—years that were full of ups and downs, successes and setbacks, happiness and trials.

And yet, as he talks to his brothers in this passage, he says that what they intended for evil, God has used for good, because now their whole family will be saved from the famine. Joseph seems convinced that the ways of God are mysterious, and that God's providence works through the span of time, even through the times when injustice seems to be winning—no matter how many years it may take.

The gospel lesson also makes us wonder about the ways of God. In this story, we hear how the Pharisees were complaining about Jesus and his disciples. They are breaking religious laws and traditions, so the Pharisees call them out. Then Jesus turns the tables and says, "what about the laws and traditions you are breaking?" He puts them in their place with a quote from Isaiah, and then brings up another teaching. The Pharisees taught that some foods are acceptable and some are not. Jesus again puts them in their place by saying it's not what goes in the mouth that is the problem; it's what comes from the heart: evil intentions and all manner of sinful acts.

I think it's safe to say that the disciples and the crowds are feeling pretty smug at this point. They see how Jesus has beaten the religious leaders at their own game, showing how they are using their authority to put down people, revealing that they are not trying to help people with their faith but are using their knowledge to judge and degrade others.

We can imagine them saying, "Take that, you Pharisees. You're not even focused on the right things!" Or, as Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it, the Pharisees are calling out Jesus' disciples, basically saying, 'hey Jesus, your disciples are losers because they are not following the rules; our God is not for losers.' When Jesus tells them they are wrong, the disciples are likely feeling like, 'hey, Pharisees, who are the losers now?'

Then, we hear, Jesus leaves that place and goes to another region, where he meets a foreign woman who challenges him in way that is surprising to us. We talk so often about Jesus being compassionate, and reaching out to help everyone in need, but in this story, he seems to be quite indifferent to the needs of this woman and her daughter.

In the last few weeks, we've talked about these stories being connected to what comes before and after. And I think that is true today, too. Some commentators suggest that Jesus' behavior in this story is a continuation of what has just happened with the Pharisees, who think their religion is only for a select few who can follow all the rules to their satisfaction. Jesus exposed what was really in their hearts, and now, it seems, Jesus needs to expose what is in the disciples' hearts.

The woman comes to Jesus crying out for help. Jesus takes a pause and does not respond immediately. In this pause, the disciples reveal what is going on inside themselves. "Hey, we are not here to help the foreigners. Plus, she's a woman and we can't stand her yelling out at us." They might as well said, 'she's a loser; our God is not for her.'

So, Jesus exposes their flawed thinking – the same thinking as the Pharisees. This time Jesus follows their lead and responds to the woman with their judgment. "Yes," he says to the woman, "our religion is very exclusive; it's not for everyone."

She asks again for his help. And he replies with more of the same, "oh no, there is not enough to go around; we have to save God's grace for just 'the winners.'"

Now, remember just before this, Jesus was with his disciples with a crowd of over 5,000 people. Remember how they said then there would not be enough to feed the crowd with only 5 loaves and 2 fish. Remember how when Jesus blessed the food and they began to distribute it there was enough to fill everyone plus have 12 baskets of leftovers.

Jesus knows there is no limit on the amount of blessing or feeding or healing or love from God. Perhaps he is hoping that his disciples are remembering that, too, when he makes this outlandish reply.

The woman responds with another point about leftovers – the dogs get the leftovers from dinner.

So we might wonder: Do the disciples understand the point? Do they see that just as Jesus was telling the Pharisees they did not get it, he is now telling the disciples they don't get it?

We don't know. Maybe it's one of the many things the disciples see only in hindsight. Like when Jesus tells them he will have to suffer and die and after three days will rise again. They do not understand it in the moment, but after the resurrection, they finally get what Jesus was saying – that God is not limited by religious rules. That God is not limited by religion. That God's love is not just for "the winners" – God's love is not just for one kind of person, one nation, one religion, one gender, one race. God is not limited by any of the categories we humans create.

And God is active in the world in ways we do not always see and often do not understand. God's ways are mysterious. God worked through Joseph's brothers who heartlessly sold him off into slavery. God worked through Jesus' ragtag bunch of disciples. God can work through someone completely outside acceptable society, even a foreign woman.

As we read our stories of faith we see that our God is a God of expansion, and inclusion, and reconciliation. God acts in ways we do not always expect. As Christians, our hope is not dependent on the logic of human minds, or the expectations of conventional wisdom. Our hope lies in a God whose purposes are being worked out, in all times, and in all circumstances, through all kinds of people.

Instead of trying to make God operate on our time, we need to align ourselves with God's time, with God's purpose, and with God's activity in all its mystery. It is never too late to repair the past, and it is never too soon to bring God's future into our present.

With prayer and faith, let us be agents of God's purposes, and live in God's mystery.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, we come to you with so many prayers of thanks. We thank you for the people of the Bible, and the ways their stories continue to inspire us. We thank you that Jesus came and showed himself to be truly human, and that the early church did not leave behind those stories of his humanity. We thank you that in Jesus your compassion is revealed, and that our lives are safe in your loving hands.

By your Holy Spirit, help us to be persistent in prayer, to eagerly bring our cares and concerns to you, to learn to pray for those we name as our enemies.

O God of compassion, we pray for all those who are in need of your healing—those who have been broken by illness, or oppression, or tragic accidents; those who are weary of chronic limits to their good health. We pray for those discouraged by addictions, and ask that you be near to those who are mentally and emotionally ill. Bring reconciliation and forgiveness to those suffering in relationships that are not working – parents and children, spouses, siblings, friends – all who are separated and longing for wholeness.

Transform our contentious hearts, O God, so that we may be true followers of the Prince of Peace. Help us to live peaceably in our homes, our church, our community, and our world. Teach us to differ without hatred and malice, and to disagree in ways that are productive.

We pray for leaders of nations and states, churches and communities, that they may seek to care for the needs of the poor and the suffering. May we never lose hope for a world where your peace and justice are made known.

We trust in your mercy, Holy God, believing that You know our needs and the needs of this world far better than we, so we commend all our prayers into your loving hands, and ask that you continue to guide us to follow in the way of Jesus.

Hear us now as we say the prayer that he taught us:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn

Choir

"Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" verses 1, 3, 4 #423 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Offering

Friends, fear is a great stumbling block in the life of faith. Fear causes us to believe we never have enough. Fear teaches us to cling to what we have. Fear keeps us in survival

mode and impedes our generosity. Faith gives us the courage to trust in God when the voices of fear fill us up. Trusting in God's presence, let us give generously to support God's work in the world.

We give thanks for our many gifts. Churches depend on the generosity of members and friends to support their ministries. If you are able to mail in an offering, or give online at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>, we are grateful. If all you can do is offer prayers for the church, we love you for that gift. Whether it's money, time, attention, a phone call, a text, an e-mail, a smile, a decoration in your window or yard – there are so many ways we can reach out to others and know we are not alone. We are blessed to be able to connect to one another and to love one another. We are in this together. Thank you for your generous giving!

Song of Praise

Ryan Dwyer

These are probably the most-sung lines in the last 300 years, so here are both the traditional words, and another variation:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Christ, all creatures here below;
Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter;
One God, Triune, whom we adore.

Benediction and Blessing

Sisters and Brothers, this is our hope: Jesus is Lord! The reign of God is here so that we may know how to live a life of faith and not fear. So, hear these words from the apostle Paul: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, both this day and always. Amen.

Choral Benediction

Choir

May the good Lord bless and keep you,
Whether near or far away,
May you find that long awaited
Golden day today.
May your troubles all be small ones,
And your fortunes ten times ten,
May the good Lord bless and keep you
'Til we meet again.

Postlude

Ryan Dwyer

"Seek Ye First"