

Service for Sunday, March 22, 2020

Welcome:

Hello. I bid you welcome from St. John's United Church of Christ in Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania. Since we cannot meet in person due the coronavirus recommendations, we are meeting virtually. Please know that although we are not together physically, that the congregation of St. John's is together spiritually with you right now.

Welcoming prayer:

Dear ever-loving God, as we see the earth come to life around us with birdsong and flowers, remind us always of your everlasting love and care for each of us.

Let us stand strong in our faith in you in this time of testing. We know that you are with us now and always. Help us to turn to you in prayer. Help us to be mindful of Jesus' call to care for those in need. Help us to face each new day as a great gift, rejoicing in this precious gift of life.

Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

Let us each confess in our heart the ways we have fallen short of God's commandments in the past week through what we have done or what we have left undone. Take a moment to recall and ask for God's forgiveness.

Now be assured of the wonder of God's forgiveness: Friends in Christ if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This is God's gift to us and the world so that we can know abundant life.

Bible Readings: Acts 2: 42-47 1Thessalonians 14-18 Matthew 6:6

Message

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord.

Let me start by telling you a story.

The most sacred religious service I ever attended was not the literally hundreds of services I went to as a Catholic school student over 12 years of Catholic school, but one that took place during a blizzard. It was a terrible day outside but on the inside of a huge church in my hometown were eight people with the feeling that the space was filled with God.

My husband John and I and our two children had traveled from Pennsylvania to my family's home in New Jersey for the Christmas holidays. We always went home for the holidays. I come from a large family and as my siblings and I grew, married and had our own children, the holidays became events not to missed.

As the oldest child I had always been very close to my father. One of the things we shared was a deep love of God and a strong sense of the importance of religion in our lives. We always went to mass together whenever I was home, even after I left the Catholic church for the United Church of Christ. It was a shared commitment to God and each other.

A blizzard had been forecast for this particular Sunday and sure enough when we woke up the snow was already a foot and a half deep and coming down strong. Another thing my dad and I shared was a love of long walks together. Neither of us was fazed by the snow but everyone else in the family opted out. We pulled on a lot of heavy clothes and boots and headed out to walk the mile to church. On the way we wondered if anyone else would be there.

When we arrived, there were another four people who lived closer to the church who had come. We waited in the sanctuary which was open and lit and finally a priest and an altar boy appeared. It was a large sanctuary and we were all seated in our traditional seats throughout the space. And then the priest did the most wonderful thing. He said to us that the first Christians had worshipped in homes of the faithful around a table to share communion and he invited us up to the altar to stand at the table with him to celebrate the mass and communion.

It was indeed a sacred space and sacred time. There were very few of us but we were united together by the prayers of the mass and the sacrament we shared. It was holy.

The Book of Acts that we read today was written by Luke, the physician who also wrote one of the gospels. It is often called the Acts of the Apostles but it is really is the history of the early church. It is a wonderful book.

In Acts 2: 42 we are told that the early Christians came together as the community of believers; that they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” It goes on to say in verses 44 to 47: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. “

These were the people who had no church buildings, they worshipped together in the homes of the faithful with prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving. They gave to the poor. They remembered Christ in the communion.

They did this without all the formal things we associate today with worship. That we need to be in one place, our church, to worship. That we need to have a certain leader. That we need our hymnals and the choir. That we need these physical things to be able to worship God.

But the truth is we should, as Paul says “pray unceasingly” wherever we are. The purpose of the church building is to give us a place to come together to worship but it is certainly not the only place we can worship. We should also worship unceasingly.

In telling us to pray unceasingly, Paul does not mean we must be reciting specific prayers constantly. Let me read to you something from the King James Bible which will sound very familiar to us as it is the basis for the commission Jamie and I always use at the end of our service.

1 Thessalonians 5: 14-18.

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all *men*. See that none render evil for evil unto any *man*; but ever follow that which is good, both among

yourselves, and to all *men*. Rejoice evermore. **Pray without ceasing.** In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

I read several interpretations of these verses in preparing for today. One said that praying unceasingly means having an ever-open heart to God’s leading. Another said that it means praying frequently. Another said it means turning to prayer whenever our spirit is uneasy or anxious rather than continuing to be anxious. All these interpretations were about an attitude that put prayer as an automatic response to any joy, or need or gratitude we have. So prayer is not limited to a physical space but to space in our hearts and souls that is constantly connected to God throughout our day and night. Worship is not limited to a building and a ritual, it is the act of reverence and adoration we give God in our unceasing prayer.

We know from scripture that Jesus often went off alone to pray. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus withdrew to a solitary place to be alone with God and pray. ” Mark 1: 35

" Before He chose the twelve disciples: He went to a mountain and spent the night in prayer. " Luke 6: 12

Jesus also taught **us** how to pray alone: Matthew 6:6 ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

So where does all this take us? Communal prayer and worship were part of Christianity from the very beginning. Christians came together to pray, care for the poor and remember Christ in the breaking of the bread. Communal worship is an important part of our lives together as Christians.

But private prayer and worship is also a strong part of our tradition. When we cannot meet together to worship and pray, we should continue our custom of private worship and prayer alone or with our families.

Many religious groups have a place in their homes that they dedicate to worship and prayer. This might be a time for you to create one if do not already have one. A friend of mine paints icons, those beautiful pictures of saints, often done with gold backgrounds. If you are a visual person this might be a good idea for you.

You might have a way to play hymns softly in the background. There are many sites online to give you prayers for any occasion or create your own or read the Psalms. Take time each day to spend in your prayer place.

Another practice that can bring us closer to God is breath prayer. It can be done wherever you are. You find a sacred phrase that has meaning for you. Mine is "God is with me, at this moment." I say the first part to myself as I breathe in and the second as I breathe out. I have known many people for whom such a prayer is prayed many times a day to anchor them in what is really important and to assure them that they are never alone.

Make any time we cannot spend together in worship as an opportunity to create your own worship.

We need to know that God is with us in this time of trial. We need to know that God dwells with us wherever we are. We need to believe as Psalm 121: 5 says: that God is our keeper. Today and always.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understand be us with today and all days of our lives.

Amen

Let us pray:

Dear Lord: as we face the challenges of this coronavirus that is among us, help us to remember that though we may be absent from you, you are never absent from us. Help us to turn to you in prayer in times of anxiety, resting in the assurance of that presence. Help us to stay connected to you, the source of life and healing as we experience this life threatening event together.

We pray for those suffering from this disease. Ease their pain, calm their anxiety, Bless them with strength and health. We pray that you will guide the medical professionals who are bravely caring for the sick. Please keep them healthy and let them feel your sustaining grace as they work. Help our leaders make wise decisions as we go forward.

We pray this in Jesus name who taught us to pray:

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.

Commission and Blessing:

Now go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the afflicted, honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face to shine upon you. May He lift up His countenance and give you peace. Amen.

Blessings to you from St. John's United Church of Christ in Orwigsburg.