**Sunday, August 16, 2015, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Call to Worship (please see bulletin)**

**Prayer of the Day**

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob  
God of our fathers and mothers,  
Who sees the struggles of your people,  
and comes to save,  
Give us eyes to see you in burning bush,  
feet to feel the holy ground beneath us,  
and hearts willing to go where you send us,  
So that all your people may know your salvation.  
Amen.

**Prayer of Confession (please see bulletin)**

**Assurance of Grace**

True abundance does not come because of what we do  
but because of the Person we know.  
Jesus still feeds hungry strangers – even us –and calls us to share with others.  
Thanks be to God.  
Friends, believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ!

**In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.  Amen.**

**Psalm 111:1-10 (see bulletin)**

**Prayers of the People**

Holy God,  
your grace is amazing  
beyond comprehension  
surrounding and filling  
all creation.  
We give you thanks  
for your unbounded love  
for glimpses of your kingdom  
for faith lived and visible  
for hope that will not let go  
for joy that has come  
in the morning.  
Where weeping lingers  
where grief overwhelms  
where color divides  
where fires rage  
where hate is on display  
where love is unacceptable  
where cynicism threatens  
Give us courage to reach out a hand.  
And where we have tried to pull away—  
ignoring our part  
whitewashing our history  
accepting lies as truth  
—stand firm in your call and your promise  
and give us courage to live your truth  
according to your way  
in order that all may have life.  
O Christ the master carpenter  
use your tools well in the workshop of your world.  
Build us into your household and fill the house with your Spirit.  
Hold us together and never let us go.  
When we are tempted to move on  
from Charleston  
from Ferguson  
from McKinney  
from the South Side  
give us your heart, and break us open  
to tear down dividing walls  
to love one another as you love us.  
When we are tempted to downplay joy  
as a sacrifice to our fear  
as a new prison for those now free  
give us courage to rejoice with those who rejoice  
to celebrate love and commitment  
to insist that your covenant is indeed for all  
and to love one another,  
even beyond the measures of our mind.  
You, O God, are the builder of the house  
and we your living stones.  
Ground us in the word preached  
by your apostles and prophets  
and build us up into your kingdom  
with room for all  
and dividing walls for none.  
Open our hands as you open our hearts  
move us by your Spirit to reach out  
beyond our comfort  
beyond our understanding  
into the work of your hope and promise.  
We pray in the name of the One whose empty hands stretch out to all creation, creating one humanity fit for your kingdom, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together…

**TIME OUT FOR TEACHING: Ordinary Means of Grace: Prayer**

I have a story to tell. One day I arrived at church in a pretty depressed and foul mood. When we arrived at the moment to say the Prayers of the People, I was starting to feel worse. So when the worship leader then launched us into the Lord’s Prayer, I could barely squeak any words out without tearing up. I gave up. I simply prayed in my heart asking God if the words the rest of the church were praying would be enough for me.

Prayer is one of the ways you can ordinarily perceive the grace of God. The most obvious way is when we pray to God for forgiveness of our sins. And when we pray earnestly and honestly to God, in confession of our sins, God hears us and cleanses us of unrighteousness.

Prayer is at the very heart of worship. That’s what it says in the Presbyterian Book of Order. If we approach our worship but not prayerfully, then it isn’t really worship. It is just going through the motions of worship. And prayer is the most basic form of worship. Even if we pray in our beds as we fall asleep at night, we are worshiping God. For we are placing our hearts and all our lives in God’s hands when we talk to him. As we head into the new season of school and fall, harvesting our gardens and fields, and think more on God’s bountiful grace, I challenge you to pray more, live in a state of prayer at all times. Pray without ceasing.

**Prayer for Illumination**

As we read the words of scripture,  
we are pointed to your living Word who walked among us;  
and we are surrounded by your Spirit,  
who whispers words within our hearts and minds.  
Inspire us in our hearing and reflecting,  
that we may move beyond your words  
into life-changing acts of grace, love, hope, and peace.  
Amen.

**Micah 6:6-8**

**6**“With what shall I come before the Lord,  
    and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
    with calves a year old?  
**7**Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
    with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
**8**He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
    and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
    and to walk humbly with your God?

**Ephesians 5:15-20**

**15**Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, **16**making the most of the time, because the days are evil. **17**So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **18**Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, **19**as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, **20**giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Luke 10:25-37**

**25**Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **26**He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” **27**He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” **28**And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

**29**But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”**30**Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. **31**Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32**So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.**33**But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34**He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35**The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ **36**Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”**37**He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

**Sermon: The Culture of the Kingdom**

This morning I wish to address another question from the question jar: “What is the meaning of life?”

We don’t ask that question often enough, especially if life seems to be going pretty well for us. No big problems, just manageable ones. But the person who asks this question is either a deep thinking philosopher or just feels dissatisfied. We often don’t dwell on such a question because we know there are many possible answers and they all help to add meaning to our lives.

But we ask, “What is the meaning of life,” often when we find ourselves in the middle of a slow-moving crisis, a time of grieving or questioning, or transition, when we are grasping to make sense of it all.

Just about every religion of the world attempts to give us the Meaning of Life. And just about every religious tradition of the world preaches some kind of ethic that involves helping the poor and needy. And to do it with humility. Now, that’s just what their doctrines say, including ours. How we actually put that ethic into practice varies a little. Some of us do those good works for show, or for our own self interest. Some of us don’t actually do them at all, even though we know our faith requires it of us, as Micah 6 says, we are required to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

We are all guilty at times of forgetting that compassion is to lie at the root of our good works, alongside faith and humility. Just look at the dilemma of the curious young man who questions Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Ironically, he knows what the books of the Law say, but his whole question is pointing at his own interest, his interest in eternal life. He already knows that he is to love God and love neighbor.

But his next question further reveals his lack of depth on this subject: “Who is my neighbor?” Then Jesus tells him the story we all know so well of the Samaritan man who helped that poor, beaten, left-for-dead man.

Jesus turns the tables on this confused man with this parable. He begins to tell it because the man asks, “Who is my neighbor?” The Samaritan, someone that Jewish man would have found totally dirty and distasteful, comes out the hero. And Jesus ends with asking, “Who was the neighbor in this story?” The guy who comes out looking the best in the parable was not a Jewish priest, nor a Teacher of the Law, but a yucky Samaritan, who does this act of mercy. The story allows this curious lawyer to imagine, what if HE were the guy beaten and left for dead, then HE would have been so lucky that ANYONE would stop to help, even a Samaritan!

This is the culture of God’s kingdom. A place where people come together who by our world’s expectations would not have normally been seen hanging out together. Church is a place where we are called to be and live together in such a way that we get to display God’s intentions for the whole world, in spite of our prejudices and quirks. That’s one of the purposes of the church. Jesus calls us together to be the Church as a gift to the world. So it would be a demonstration that the Kingdom of God is near.

There is a very interesting farm located in Americus, Georgia, called Koinonia Farm. It began in 1942 by two couples, Clarence and Florence Jordan and Mabel and Martin England. They were guided by three principles: All humankind are related under God; Love is the alternative to violence; and Share all possessions. Their goal was to be a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” In the 1940s they started interracial Bible studies. Remember this was the deep South. Through the 1950s their choice to welcome people of color and support equal rights lead to bullets, bomb threats and the Ku Klux Klan at their gates. Koinonia Farm is still there today. It’s a place of welcome to all.

God calls us all, every church, to be a reflection of the kingdom of God. I think that’s pretty exciting, brings new meaning to our lives, for being a neighbor to one another, and to those who are unloved, defying this world’s expectations. So, if we are ever wondering what the meaning of life is, or trying to find ourselves again, just think of being a neighbor to another. Let me leave you with a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandi: “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” That’s the culture of God’s kingdom. To do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Amen.

**Announcements**

Next Sunday we continue our “What’s a Presbyterian?” Summer Adult Education series on Sundays at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. It’s not too late to join in the conversation.

Ever had a question about God?  The Bible?  Or something theological?  Your question might become the next sermon topic. Please write your questions down and drop them in the jar in the Narthex.