**First Presbyterian Church Tucumcari**

**Worship 11:00AM**

## Sunday, September 4, 2016, the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

**Prayer of the Day**

Lord, you have walked with us all week long,

Even in those times when we didn’t notice.

Let our worship of you today proclaim your goodness and mercy

Your blessings that overflow and the good things we enjoy

Which we cannot count.

We praise you and thank you for all that we have.

Remove from our hearts whatever blocks us from

Giving you all our praise today.

This we ask in the name of Christ the Savior.

Amen.

**Call to Confession**

On our journey with God, we often make mistakes, and hurt each other. By acknowledging these mistakes, and asking for forgiveness, we work to heal that pain, and reconcile with each

other and with God. Let us join together in prayer:

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

**Assurance of Pardon**

No matter how often we forget God’s presence, or choose to follow our own paths and dreams, God calls out to us to return to the path, that God has already forgiven us, and that Jesus is waiting for us with open arms.

**May we love God and each other as much as God loves us! Amen.**

Friends, Believe the Good News of Jesus Christ.

**In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

**Responsive Reading: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 (please see bulletin)**

**Time Out for Teaching: Once-Useless**

There is no gospel reading this morning. Listen for the gospel in the readings you are about to hear and I believe you will hear it. I call this teaching “once-useless” because God’s forgiveness makes us useful, where we weren’t much use to Him before. First, Israel in the book of Jeremiah. Second, in Philemon and Onesimus’ lives, where forgiveness becomes the goal of getting these two men back together.

**Jeremiah 18:1-11**

1The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." 3So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

5Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. 9And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. 11Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

**Epistle Philemon 1-21**

1Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

8For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

**22**One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

**23**Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, **24**and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

**25**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

**Sermon: “Paul’s Plan”**

This letter to Philemon is very special. Usually, I write pastoral letters to churches. But this letter I write under extraordinary circumstances.

See, his slave, Onesimus, has run away. And I write this letter to send back with him to his master, Philemon. Onesimus, was able to find me in prison. He confessed to me that he made a mistake in his services to Philemon’s household. But Philemon, in punishing his servant, acted rashly, instead of trying to work out forgiveness. Philemon and his household are Christians, but they’re new Christians and, as you and I know, forgiveness is one of the hardest practices of our faith.

I felt like, after Onesimus came to me, confessed his mistakes, through my ministry, he finally learned that he was forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ. With his conversion to Jesus, this seems like the perfect, God-given opportunity to bring him and his Master back together. The only thing is, the laws about runaway slaves are complex. If I don’t return him to his master, I am obligated to turn him in to the authorities. But returning him to his master is also difficult if Philemon harbors a grudge. I think I have given him good reason to take his slave back. Furthermore, bringing them back together, is a way put in plain sight God’s kingdom!

So I just did what I do well. I wrote this letter for Onesimus to carry back to his master. I explained that Onesimus is no longer just a slave to him. He is now much more than that. He bears the same name as many slaves do – a name that means “Useful.” But now, he is even more useful, by becoming a believer in Jesus. God is now using him as an opportunity for forgiveness to take place in Philemon’s house. It’s time that they become family through the blood of Christ. If Philemon accepts Onesimus on my terms, Onesimus shall become a true member of the household. There is no reason why Philemon should turn him away. And God’s plan shall be served through reconciliation and unity.

I hope that my plan fits God’s plan. For, reconciliation and unity is part of what it means to belong to God through Jesus Christ. God shall use us to show forth in our lives how it looks to be a part of His kingdom. I remember I thought I was being useful until the day I was struck blind on the road to Damascus, and I heard the accusing voice of the Lord saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” That’s when I knew that I was not serving the Lord in the best way possible. Through the ministry of Ananias, I converted in faith, regained my sight, and could finally understand that God wanted to proclaim through me the Gospel of forgiveness wherever I am sent. I believe that it’s not just my work to do this, but for all people.

So, in my letter, I remind Philemon that I am like a father to him, and I tried to be loving, but firm, persuasive but not quite controlling. I told that I adopted Onesimus as my very own heart, so that he be persuaded to adopt Onesimus the same. I want Philemon to welcome Onesimus just like he welcomes me, for I believe Onesimus’ faith bears God’s handiwork through my efforts.

Well, on my next visit, I’ll find out if the plan worked. For we see through a glass darkly – hm, that’s good, I should use that in a letter sometime.

I am confident that Philemon will hear me out and I shall be encouraged by what I see. For I taught Philemon’s house that the true head of the household is Jesus Christ and all of them are servants to Him. Praise be to Jesus the Christ, first born from the dead, first fruit of the resurrection! Amen.

**Service of Holy Communion**

**Invitation**

We are all servants in the house of the Lord, and by His hand we are fed. We come today, some seeking guidance, some celebrating renewal. Some needing comfort, some glad for healing. We come today in our times of need and our times of joy. All who come seeking the presence of Jesus Christ in their lives are invited to dine at this table.

It’s not a Presbyterian table, but a table where we are guests and Jesus is our host. Come, Jesus is calling to you.

**Words of Institution**

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to his disciples saying, this is my body broken for you. Take this and eat in remembrance of me.

Then he took the cup, and he gave it to them saying, drink this all of you. This is cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this in remembrance of me.

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.

**The Great Thanksgiving**

The Lord be with you!  
**And also with you!**  
Lift up your hearts!  
**We lift them up to the Lord.**  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.  
**It is right to give both thanks and praise!**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe,  
for your grace overflows in your world,  
creating and redeeming and sustaining all things.  
Your streams of mercy flow from your glory  
bringing living water into every place,  
nourishing creation, making it bear fruit that will last,  
filling our cup until it runs over, spilling out abundant life.  
We give you thanks for your generous providing,  
and for your call to be your people.  
We have wandered in the desert, we have turned our backs,  
we have followed the path, we have walked on ahead,  
and still your Spirit calls us, tugging us back to your way,  
shining your light and singing your grace  
so we might follow in faith.

It is with gratitude, praise, and hearts lifted high that we come to your table,  
calling to mind your Son who walked among us,  
who ate with sinners and tax collectors and women  
the same as he ate with Pharisees and disciples and neighbors.  
As he reached out to touch the sick, may we reach out with healing hands.  
As he went to the bad neighborhoods and visited the homes of the poor,  
may we go out to where your people long for good news.  
As he spread health and holiness with every step, every word, every breath,  
may we live as if grace is contagious,  
sharing your love with people near and far,  
those we meet and those we would rather avoid.

As we meet at the feast of your family, O God,  
we carry with us those who hunger and thirst,  
who cannot imagine the abundance of this table,  
who feel excluded or forgotten,  
who live with fear and violence,  
who wait for justice, who long for peace,  
who suffer in body, mind, or spirit.

When we break bread together, break our hearts too,  
and then by your Spirit bind us together with all your people  
to seek your purpose and work your will.  
Give us a glimpse of your kingdom, where the whole human family eats together,  
and strengthen us with the courage to build your kingdom here on earth.

We offer our hearts and lives to you, O God,  
praying that you would use grain and grape  
to write your covenant of love within us.  
until grace overflows.  
We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, host at this and every table, who taught us to pray together… *the Lord’s Prayer*

**Distribution of Elements**

**Communion Prayer**

Blessed are you, O Lord. For you have once again fed us with spiritual food for the journey.

So strengthen us for your service with these visible reminders of your holy presence. Make us stronger in faith, bolster our hearts when we feel low, and sharpen our vision of where you are already at work in the world, where you call us as partners in your service. This we ask in your Holy Spirit. Amen.