

# SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE

June 9, 2024

## WORDS OF WELCOME

### **INTROIT:** *“All Are Welcome”*

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1 Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions.

*Chorus: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

2 Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,  
where all God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s reign anew.  
Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God’s grace;  
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus. (Chorus)

### **CALL TO WORSHIP:** adapted from *“Written by Beth Merrill Neel on her blog, ‘Hold Fast to What Is Good’.* Used with permission.”

*L: We gather as God’s beloved children -*

**C: However glad we are, however out of sorts we are.**

*L: We come together as a people whom Jesus calls into community -*

**C: So this becomes a place where all are welcome.**

*L: We have come to give thanks, to pray and sing, to be with other -*

**A: Let us worship God.**

### **HYMN: #275** *“Come Now, Almighty God”* (Public Domain)

1 Come now, almighty God, help us your name to laud;  
Our Songs we raise; Ruler, all glorious, o'er all victorious,  
come, and reign over us, Ancient of Days.

2 Come now, incarnate Word, By heaven and earth adored;  
Our prayer attend: Come and your people bless, and give your word success,  
Grant us your holiness, Savior and Friend.

3 Come, Holy Comforter, your sacred witness bear in this glad hour.  
Your grace to us impart, now rule in every heart, never from us depart, Spirit of power!

4 To you, great One in Three, eternal praises be forever more!  
Your sovereign majesty may we in glory see, and to eternity love and adore.

### **PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION & NEW LIFE:**

*L: Trusting that God sent Jesus into the world not for condemnation but for salvation, I invite us all to spend a few minutes in silence sharing with God what is on our hearts and simply listening to God and reflecting on God’s forgiveness, love, guidance, redemption and restoration of our lives*

*Moment of Silence, In Confession, Listening to God &  
Reflection on God’s Forgiveness, Love, Guidance, Redemption, and Restoration of our Lives*

## **WORDS OF GRACE:**

*L: God our Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer comes to us with grace, offering forgiveness and mercy, setting us free from past wrongs and with the help of the Holy Spirit empowers us to live life anew.*

**A: We trust God and believe in God's grace and mercy and therefore we are forgiven and set free to let go of our past burdens that weigh us down. With the help of God, we will rise up into renewed life and share it with others. Thanks be to God.**

## **HYMN OF PRAISE: #778    *"Doxology"***

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise God all creatures here below;  
Praise God for all that love has done; Creator, Christ, and Spirit, One.

## **SCRIPTURE:**

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### **John 3:20-35**

#### **Jesus Accused by His Family and by Teachers of the Law**

<sup>20</sup> Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. <sup>21</sup> When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

<sup>22</sup> And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

<sup>23</sup> So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. <sup>27</sup> In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

<sup>30</sup> He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit."

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

<sup>33</sup> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

<sup>34</sup> Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

## **A TIME OF REFLECTION:    *"Let the Spirit Flow Freely"***

One thing that has played a big factor in my faith journey has been hearing people's testimonies of how God has been present in their lives and through that - beginning to notice God's presence in situations for myself and eventually being willing to share that myself even if people might not believe me.

For instance, in 1985 my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor for which she underwent surgery to remove the tumor. Before her surgery and while recovering, she would talk about all these little children that surrounded her bed, not interacting with her but just playing with one another. When she came home from the hospital the children came with her but as she recovered less and less children remained until one day, they were all gone. Initially in the hospital we attributed these visions to hallucinations but soon came to believe God sent these children to her; giving her strength and a peace that goes beyond all understanding to get her

through a tough time. My mother has always found great joy and peace in watching children play. When she no longer needed them, they were gone. As the years went by, we started noticing that about two weeks before any major crisis in my mother's life the little children would begin showing up and surrounding her, not interacting with her but simply a presence with her and they would remain until the crisis was over. We realized that when the children began to show up to be aware that something was going to happen. Most of these events were related to my mother's health, so again some might attribute these visions to hallucinations. However, on one occasion, 2 weeks before my sister-in-law had a miscarriage which threatened her own life, the children began to show up. This time my mother was facing no physical trauma, yet the children were there 2 weeks before the event happened and again remained with her until emotional pain was gone. Now there are those of you who will believe as I do that God was at work in this, while others may doubt, still others may find inspiration and hope in this testimony. I know many people who are very careful about whom they will share their testimony about God at work in their lives for fear others might think they are crazy or imagining things. By letting that fear stifle our testimony, we are also letting that fear stifle the work of the Holy Spirit.

In today's Gospel lesson, the scribes at the very least fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit within Jesus and they attribute his power to the forces of evil. Why is this; Jesus failed to adhere to the religious and cultural norms of his day. Enlivened and led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus strayed from the officially sanctioned path for holy living. Even his family tries to stifle him because they heard people saying that he was out of his mind. We are not told if they want to restrain him because they believe these accusations and find it an embarrassment to the family or if they just fear for his life, but either way, the unintentional result of their efforts, is that they are attempting to rein in the power of the Holy Spirit. Both the religious leaders and Jesus' family are well intentioned, but blind to the work of the Holy Spirit and to how their actions are an attempt to hinder that. We always paint the religious leaders as completely corrupt, but let's face it; still today we struggle with trying to determine the will of God, yet often because we interpret the scriptures through a narrow lens we often fail to see and hear the work of the Holy Spirit; though well intentioned our efforts quite frequently attempt to stifle the work of the Holy Spirit.

So what was Jesus' response to all of this? Jesus didn't disavow them. I know it sounds that way when Jesus says whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness and is guilty of eternal sin and at the end of this passage tells the gathered crowd that you are my family "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister." But, Jesus first response to them was to share with them a parable about a house divided cannot stand in order that they may see the error of their thinking. And then he shares that people will be forgiven of their sins and whatever blasphemes they utter before he speaks of the unforgivable sin. There is a real message of mercy and forgiveness here.

Yet, I have to admit, this scripture always troubled me because I know there have been times where I have said things that I believe could be considered blasphemous to the Holy Spirit, yet I trust in God's forgiveness. In my research of this passage, I came across an explanation by Lamar Williamson that I think is very helpful in making some sense out of this passage that seems to be contradictory. He says, that the sin against the Holy Spirit "is unforgivable because it rejects the very agent of God's healing and forgiveness," and anyone who worries about it is, in a sense, logically, innocent of it. "Only those who set themselves against forgiveness," he writes, "are excluded from it." Certitude born neither of weakness nor of honest seeking leaves no opening for God. Certitude clouds the possibility of conceiving one might be mistaken in one's judgment. Doubt is not the absence of faith but an admission that we are not able to put all the pieces of life together in a neat solution to the puzzle. What may be missed is the remarkable expansiveness of God's mercy proclaimed in this passage, if we only focus on the words, "*whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.*", and fail to see it in light of the wider context of the passage.

In other words, Jesus didn't exclude the religious leaders or his family; Jesus was warning them that they are in danger of building themselves a wall where they refuse to see the work of the Holy Spirit because it doesn't fit a prescribed formula. They are unable to acknowledge the need of God's mercy and in that fail to open themselves to receive God's mercy. In this they hinder their ability to offer that same mercy to others. They are excluding themselves. When Jesus talked about his followers being his family, he didn't exclude his biological family from being a part of his family, but he was not going to let them interfere with his doing the

work of the Holy Spirit while showing the expansiveness of God's mercy and inclusion no matter how it appeared to them.

So, my question is this, "How might we continue to allow the Spirit to work in and through us in order that more and more are included in God's family rather than excluded? How have we failed to carry out the great commission to go and make disciples of all the world because we have focused on the wrong questions such as growing the church rather than how do we equip people for discipleship? When have we failed to share our faith because we fear what people might think? Have we learned to share our faith in an invitational way sharing what we believe and why, without insisting that others believe exactly as we do, leaving room for the Holy Spirit to act both in us and the person with whom we shared?"

Several years ago, I attended a workshop on Coaching Spiritual Vitality in the Congregation. Jim LaDoux, the workshop facilitator told the story of how he shared in worship the joy and laughter of serving God and then gave everyone a snickers bar and challenged them to give the snicker to someone and share how their faith has brought joy and laughter into their life. An 80-year-old man came back to him the next week and told him that was the first time he had ever shared his faith with anyone outside of the church setting.

As you leave today, I challenge you to pick up a cup on the card table which contains a Jolly Rancher to remind you to share with someone beyond this building how God transformed a sour situation into something sweet that gave you joy, or maybe the situation was not transformed but you were and experienced inner peace and joy that comes from God during the time of trial. It also contains a Werther's caramel filled candy to remind you to share an instance where God was able to soften your hardened heart. Let us not let fear what people will think, but freely share as the Spirit guides. Let us also remain open to revelations of the Holy Spirit through others as our Still Speaking God speaks through us and to us every day of our lives.

God of all creation, grant us the wisdom to recognize the work of your Holy Spirit and the willingness to follow its guidance. Thank you for mercy and grace so freely offered to all who are open to you and the guidance of your Holy Spirit. Where our hearts have become hardened shells, may your Spirit crack through the hardened shell, in order to live in and flow forth from the soft centers of our hearts. Let not fear or hard-heartedness stifle the work of your Holy Spirit in this world. Amen

### **HYMN OF RESPONSE: #530 "God Our Author and Creator"**

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1 God our Author and Creator, in whose life we find our own,  
Make our daily witness greater, by our lives make Your love known.  
Help us show how love embraces those whom fear and greed down trod;  
In all yearning hearts and faces let us see a child of God

2 Like those first apostles, Savior, give us strength to love and serve;  
When our fainting spirits waver, fire our hearts and steel our nerve.  
Teach us wisdom and compassion; bid our restless thoughts be still;  
By Your guidance help us fashion lives conformed to do Your will.

3 Keep us faithful, Holy Spirit, help us bear the message true,  
That at last all lands may hear it; "God is love Christ died for you."  
Join our lives in mighty chorus till we come from every place,  
With all those who went before us, to the fullness of God's grace.

### **A TIME OF PRAYER - LIFTING UP PRAYER REQUESTS - THE LORD'S PRAYER**

### **INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:**

**PRAYER OF DEDICATION:**

*L: Gracious God of the Resurrection,*

**A: We thank you for your gift of Jesus Christ, who cares for us, shepherds us and protects us. We thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit which empowers us with strength and courage to do your will. With these gifts we return to you, we ask that they be acceptable to you, and that you would bless them, multiply them and guide their uses so that they may be used to help us care for others in our communities and around the world; thus making your love known and shown both near and far. Amen.**

**SUMM-IT UP:**

**SENDING HYMN: “I’ve Got that Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy” (Public Domain)**

1 I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy Down in my heart (where?)  
Down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart  
I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy Down in my heart (where?)  
Down in my heart to stay

Chorus

And I'm so happy So very happy I've got the love of Jesus in my heart  
And I'm so happy so very happy I've got the love of Jesus in my heart

2 I've got the love of Jesus, love of Jesus Down in my heart (where?)  
Down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart  
I've got the love of Jesus, love of Jesus Down in my heart (where?)  
Down in my heart to stay (Chorus)

3 I've got the peace that passes understanding Down in my heart (where?)  
Down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart  
I've got the peace that passes understanding  
Down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart to stay

**CHARGE & BENEDICTION:**

Having been spiritually fed and nourished by the one who created, redeems and sustains us,  
Let us go forth sharing that nourishment with others no matter how others might perceive us.  
As you embrace both the joys and costs of discipleship,  
May the Lord bless and keep you.  
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.  
May the Lord look upon you kindly and grant you the peace God alone can give.

**POSTLUDE:**