

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2024

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

GATHERING

A SHARING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 118)*

- One: Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
- All: This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.**
- One: The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- All: This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.**
- One: This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- All: Hosanna, we beseech you, O Lord!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.**

***OPENING HYMN** "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" GtG 196

Refrain: **All glory, laud, and honor
to thee, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!**

**1. Thou art the King of Israel,
thou David's royal Son,
who in the Lord's name comest,
the King and blessed One. (Refrain)**

**2. The people of the Hebrews
with palms before thee went;
our praise and prayers and anthems
before thee we present. (Refrain)**

(continued...)

3. **To thee, before thy passion,
they sang their hymns of praise;
to thee, now high exalted,
our melody we raise. *(Refrain)***
4. **Thou didst accept their praises;
accept the prayers we bring,
who in all good delightest,
thou good and gracious King! *(Refrain)***

Words: Theodulph of Orleans, ca. 820; trans. John Mason Neale, 1851, alt.
Music: VALET WILL ICH DIR GEBEN, Melchior Teschner, 1614; arr. William
Henry Monk, 1861
Public Domain

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Accept the praise we bring, O God, accept the good we offer, and forgive us the sins we do. We sing your praises one moment, and the next we act as if we did not even know you. We pledge ourselves to you, then run in fear at the first sign of difficulty. We speak of our love for you, but our lives betray us. Forgive us, merciful and tender God. Renew and transform us by the working of your Spirit, that our words and our deeds may proclaim you Lord. May we learn to rely upon your strength and rest in your grace, that we may know your peace and live your truth and follow in the way of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray.
Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Mark 1 and Romans 5)*

- One: “The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!”
- All: **The Good News is this: “God has shown us how much God loves us, for it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!”**
- One: Friends, believe that Good News! Claim it! Live it!
- All: **In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!**

THE PEACE

- One: The peace of Christ be with you.
- All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 15:1-15

MARK 15:1-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" ¹³ They shouted back, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "Barabbases All" by Pastor Bill Vincent

A driver speeds through an intersection, hitting a young woman who loses both her legs.
Terrorists enter a concert hall, killing over a hundred and setting fire to the building.
A hidden, unseen assailant scams someone out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.
Examples – too many to count – of people committing crimes that make us cringe.
And we think to ourselves, "They should get what they deserve. It's only right."

Jesus didn't get what he deserved.
Barabbas didn't get what he deserved.
And neither do we.

"But wait a minute, Bill," I can almost hear you say, "don't put us in the same category as scam artists, reckless drivers, terrorists. We're not that kind of people."
Got it. You're right.

And yes, in certain contexts, we should be careful not to put on the same scale the reckless driver with the one who speaks little white lies, the mass shooter with the one who uses foul language.

But the one holding the scale in this context is not you or I. Behind the scene in Pilate's court are God's scales, not our own. And God has a slightly different slant on things:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire. ... You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ... Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all... You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ... You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven [who] makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34a, 38-41, 43-45 NRSV)

According to God's scales, things are weighted slightly differently. And, according to God's scales, we all are in deep trouble.

For God knows that with every bending or withholding of the truth, we paint a little more of the black side white and the white side black, until we cannot distinguish the one from the other, and all truth becomes only relative; in other words, my relatives are true and yours are not – and I say that only slightly facetiously.

God knows that every betrayal of our brother or sister, however slight, is one more wedge between us, one more tear in the fabric of our community, one more crack in the foundation of trust: a foundation necessary for us to live in peace and harmony, one with another.

God knows that every time we picture using or abusing someone else, their value is lessened in our eyes, and our respect for them and for human life is diminished more and more, and so, then, is our respect for ourselves.

Every time we turn away from God's will for us and for life in general – be it a small or large act, according to our evaluation – we eat away at the community and trust and love and life that God desires for us and intends for us and indeed for which God created us.

When we put it that way, yes, we all are in deep trouble.

Or as Paul says it, rather bluntly,

there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:22b-23 NRSV)

All indeed.

However, remember that is not all that Paul says in his letter to the Romans, for later he also writes,

For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked at the time that God chose. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much [God] loves us – [for] it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! ... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of [God's] Son. (Romans 5:6-8,10a TEV & NRSV)

It is the crux of the good news. And it is precisely what we see in our story this morning. Barabbas, the one who is guilty, is set free. Jesus, the one who is innocent, is condemned. A travesty of justice? Yes! But also the true demonstration of God's love and mercy. A travesty of justice, and so a condemnation of ourselves. But then also the exercise of God's love and forgiveness, and so the central act of God's saving us, even from ourselves.

It serves as a parable for us all – a parable OF us all. For each of us, in his or her own way, is a Barabbas. And we do not get what we deserve. The condemnation of God, which is our just deserts, we do not receive. Instead, it falls upon Another. One who is innocent. But One who willingly accepts our punishment that we might be set free and know new life.

So we read in Isaiah,

*because of our sins he was wounded,
beaten because of the evil we did;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

(Isaiah 53:5 TEV & NRSV)

That's what the cross is all about: forgiveness offered through the condemnation of an innocent man, forgiveness for those who are guilty many times over.

A poster I once saw read,

It's scandalous of God to let people off as though they hadn't done a thing. But that is the scandal God is involved in. Apparently [God is] less concerned with making examples of people than...with ending the rule of sin and guilt in human lives. (found on poster in picture file; source unknown)

...and freeing them to true life.

Now, this is not to say that God looks the other way whenever we, or others, lie or cheat or steal; whenever we cast a hateful look or speak a hurtful word or act out our own betrayal of one another. Such acts – such sins – anger God, and we are challenged (constantly) to do better. But there is more to God than anger.

As the prophet Hosea relates God's own inner conflict, wrestling with what to do about the people and their wayward ways:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;*

...

My people are bent on turning away from me.

...

How can I give you up...?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

...

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger;

I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal,

the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come in wrath.

(Hosea 11:1-2a, 7a, 8a, 8c-9 NRSV)

God's love overcomes God's anger. And God comes in love, not in wrath. And there is forgiveness, and mercy, and a second chance to do better, and a third chance, and a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth ... a chance for life, again. And we are set free ... just like Barabbas.

Frederick Buechner sums it up this way:

Pilate told the people that they could choose to spare the life of either a murderer named Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth, and they chose Barabbas. Given the same choice, Jesus, of course, would have chosen to spare Barabbas too.

To understand the reason in each case would be to understand much of what the New Testament means by saying that Jesus is the Savior, and much of what it means too by saying that, by and large, people are in bad need of being saved.

(*Mark 15:6-15*)

(*Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, "Barabbas,")

We like that first part – Jesus as Savior – that sounds good.

But the other part is not a part of the story we necessarily enjoy hearing – about our guilt. But it is absolutely necessary that we hear that part of the story. As Buechner elsewhere says, **“The gospel is bad news before it is good news”** (*Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Bad News, Good News, and Fairy Tale*). And quite honestly, the rest of the gospel story, including the wonderful joy of Easter, makes absolutely no sense without hearing the message of our guilt and sin. For what need have we of a Savior, if we acknowledge no need of being saved?

The one who was innocent was condemned, and the one who was guilty was set free.

Now, I confess, that this would not be a good way to run a society. On the very human level of society, there is the need for laws and a justice system, in order to protect the weak from the strong, to maintain order and a certain minimal level of discipline. And so there are appropriate times when society, exercising its collective strength and will, must choose to restrain those who will not or cannot restrain themselves.

However, having made that concession, I also suggest that maybe we, and society, should exercise that justice with a little – or a lot – more humility than we now profess, demonstrating at least something of the mercy shown to us.

For

-whether it be in the halls of justice or the halls of academia,
-whether it be on the streets of Washington D.C. or the streets of Union,
-whether it be in the gathering of the Supreme Court or the garnering of the court
of public opinion,
-whether it be in the decisions of public officials or the decisions of private
citizens,

we need always to remember that, by the hand of God, neither Barabbas nor we get what
we deserve. And that is good news for us all.

Thanks be to God!

***HYMN** “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” GtG 221

- 1. O sacred head, now wounded,
with grief and shame weighed down;
now scornfully surrounded
with thorns, thine only crown;
O sacred head, what glory,
what bliss till now was thine!
Yet, though despised and gory,
I joy to call thee mine.**

- 2. What thou, my Lord, hast suffered
was all for sinners' gain:
mine, mine was the transgression,
but thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Savior!
'Tis I deserve thy place;
look on me with thy favor,
and grant to me thy grace.**

- 3. What language shall I borrow
to thank thee, dearest friend,
for this thy dying sorrow,
thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever;
and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
out-live my love to thee.**

Words: Latin, 12th or 13th cent.; trans. James Waddell Alexander, 1830, alt.
Music: PASSION CHORALE, Hans Leo Hassler, 1601; harm. Johann Sebastian
Bach, 1729
Public Domain

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from “*A Declaration of Faith*”)

Jesus died for sinners.

**Religious leaders hated Jesus
because he criticized their hypocrisy
and reproved their neglect of justice and mercy.**

**They charged him with blasphemy and sedition
when he claimed to speak and act with God's authority.**

One of Jesus' followers betrayed him.

**Others abandoned and denied him
because they were afraid to stand with him.**

**Civil authorities condemned him
because he provoked unrest among the people.**

**He was sentenced, mocked, beaten,
and crucified as a common criminal.**

**We confess that in the execution of Jesus
the sin of the human race reached its depths.**

**The only innocent one was condemned and put to death,
not by sinfulness of one nation,
but by the sinfulness of us all.**

**In the presence of Jesus,
who lived out what God wants us all to be,
we were threatened beyond endurance.**

**Blinded by our rebellion against our Creator,
we killed God's Son when we met him face to face.**

**We believe that in the death of Jesus on the cross
God achieved and demonstrated once for all
the costly forgiveness of our sins.**

Jesus Christ is the reconciler between God and the world.

**He acted on behalf of sinners as one of us,
fulfilling the obedience God demands of us,
accepting God's condemnation of our sinfulness.**

**In his lonely agony on the cross
Jesus felt forsaken by God
and thus experienced hell itself for us.**

Yet the Son was never more in accord with the Father's will.

**He was acting on behalf of God,
manifesting the Father's love that takes on itself
the loneliness, pain, and death
that result from our waywardness.**

(continued...)

**In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself,
not holding our sins against us.
Each of us beholds on the cross
the Savior who died in our place,
so that we may no longer live for ourselves,
but for him.**

“A Declaration of Faith” is Copyright 1977, 1991, the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); adopted (1977) “as a contemporary statement of faith, a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration, with the clear understanding that” it is not approved as a part of the *Book of Confessions*.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Save us, O Lord...
All: ...for your mercy is great.

THE LORD’S PRAYER (Traditional)

**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.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

For your love offered to us in Jesus Christ, we give you thanks and praise, O Lord our God. Receive our gifts as a symbol of the dedication of our very selves to you. Touch our hearts daily, that we might respond in love with our whole lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

*CLOSING HYMN “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” GtG 223

1. **When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.**
2. **Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.**
3. **See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?**
4. **Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.**

Words: Isaac Watts, 1707

Music: HAMBURG, Lowell Mason, 1824

Public Domain

*CHARGE AND BLESSING

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

The Call to Worship is reprinted by permission of Westminster John Knox Press from *Connections Worship Companion: Year B Volume 1*. Copyright 2023.

The Call to Confession and Invitation to the Offering are used by permission of United Church Press from *Led by Love* by Lavon Bayler. Copyright 1996 by United Church Press.

The Prayers of the People (adapted) are used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press from *Feasting on the Word® Worship Companion*. Copyright 2014.

The Assurance of Pardon and Prayer of Dedication are written by Matthew A. Rich and used by permission. © Presbyterian Outlook, 2024.