

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
FEBRUARY 12, 2023



“Be Reconciled”

ST. JOHN
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Rev. Rosemary Captain

Liturgy – Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay,

***CALL TO WORSHIP (INSPIRED BY SIRACH 15:15-20):**

One: Great is the wisdom of the Holy One, powerful and knowing.

Many: **God gives us the choice to follow and to be faithful.**

Great is the wisdom of the Holy One, powerful and knowing.

God offers fire to warm us and water to quench our thirst.

Great is the wisdom of the Holy One, powerful and knowing.

God considers us with care and knows our ways.

***INVOCATION:**

Righteous God. in you we find life and liberty, compassion and care, redemption and reconciliation. You make your ways known to us, and you recognize your people as we are—fully human and made in your image. You come to us, and we come to you. Let us meet in this time and place. Let us bring our hope and our fears, our joys and our sorrows, our successes and our disappointments—the fullness of this glorious and maddening life toward you assured that you meet us here. Amen.

***PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Holy God, your fire warms our hearts when they grow cold to the pain of the world, shines brightly to illuminate the shadows where we hide from you, and provides fuel to energize us when we grow weary of the work. Revive us again, O God, revive us. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

God with Us knows the feeling of fatigue, the despair of doing hard things, and the frustration of a world that has turned from the Holy One. God is faithful to refresh us, renew us, and revive us.

***GLORIA:**

**Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near.
As it was from the start so it shall be forever,
One God always here. (repeat two more times.)
(end) One God always here. One God always here.**

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Life and death

¹⁵ Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. ¹⁶ If you obey the LORD your God's commandments that^[a] I'm commanding you right now by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, ¹⁸ I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— ²⁰ by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

ESPISTLE READING: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Wisdom applied to divisions in the church

3 Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. ³ Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? ⁴ When someone says, "I belong to Paul," and someone else says, "I belong to Apollos," aren't you acting like people without the Spirit? ⁵ After all, what is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord: ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. ⁷ Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. ⁹ We are God's coworkers, and you are God's field, God's building.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 5:21-37**

Law of murder

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don't commit murder*,^[a] and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell. ²³ Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift at the altar and

go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. ²⁵ Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

Law of adultery²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, *Don't commit adultery.* ^[b] ²⁸ But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. ²⁹ And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.

Law of divorce³¹ "It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must *give her a divorce certificate.*' ^[c] ³² But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Law of solemn pledges³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.* ^[d] ³⁴ But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it's God's throne. ³⁵ You must not pledge by the earth, because

it's God's footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king. ³⁶ And you must not pledge by your head, because you can't turn one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your *yes* mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen

MESSAGE: "What does Jesus Mean about fulfillment of the law?" Part 1

I don't know about you, but I have many questions about this passage we just heard. What does Jesus mean when he said he came to fulfill the Jewish laws given to them by Moses?

While searching for answers to this question, we have to go back to better understand what laws and practices Jesus was referring to. At that time Jews considered the expression *the law* in four different ways. 1) They used it to mean the Ten Commandments. 2) They used it to mean the first five books of what we call the Bible. That part of the Bible is known as the *Pentateuch*. This was to Jews the law *par excellence* and was to them by far the most important part of their scriptures. 3) They used the phrase *the law and the prophets* to mean the whole of Scripture. 4) They used it to mean the *oral* or the *scribal law*.

In the time of Jesus, it was the last meaning which was commonest; and it was in fact this scribal law which both Jesus and Paul so utterly condemned. What, then, was this scribal law? In the First Testament itself, we find very few rules and regulations; what we do find are great, broad principles which people must take and interpret for

themselves under God's guidance, and apply it to the individual situations in life.

In the Ten Commandments we find no rules and regulations at all; they are each one a great principle out of which people must find their own rules for life. To the later Jews, these great principles did not seem enough. They held that the law was divine, and that in it God had said God's last word, and that therefore everything must be in it. If a thing was not in the law *explicitly*, it must be there *implicitly*. If the law wasn't clear, it must be unconditionally, or completely and totally true as written.

They therefore argued that out of the law it must be possible to deduce a rule and a regulation of every possible situation in life. So there arose a group of men called *the scribes* who made it the business of their lives to reduce the great principles of the law to literally thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations. (Jesus and Paul called these man-made rules; not from God.)

Here is an example. The law says that the Sabbath day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. That's a great principle. But, the Jewish legalists had a passion for definition. So, they asked: "What is work?"

All kinds of things were classified as work. For instance, *to carry a burden* on the Sabbath day is to work. But next, a burden has to be defined. So the scribal law lays it down that a burden is "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to pour upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a custom-house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to

make a pen – and so on endlessly. (I can give you more examples if you are interested.)

We can see the lengths to which this went from the following facts. For many generations, this scribal law was never written down; it was the oral law, and it was handed down in the memory of generations of scribes. In the middle of the third century AD, a summary of it was made and codified.

This summary is known as the *Mishnah*; and in English makes a book of almost 800 pages. Later Jewish scholarship busied itself with making commentaries to explain the *Mishnah*. These commentaries are known as the *Talmuds*. Of the Jerusalem *Talmud* there are twelve printed volumes; and of the Babylonian *Talmud* there are sixty printed volumes.

So now we can get the picture of what Jesus was objecting to; they took a simple principle and turned it into rules that were almost impossible to follow, so everyone was considered a sinner. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.

Next week we will talk more about this in Part 2 of trying to understand Jesus' take on the principles of the Ten commandments. He also digs deeper in each one, but not to make it more difficult to follow, rather to make them more easier to understand and find the more humanely reason behind each one. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Beginning with a time for silent personal prayer.

Holy God, guide us by both law and prophets to set as our highest priority making peace with our brothers and sisters,

so that we may be properly prepared to offer you our worship and be ready for your just judgement.

Sometimes we stumble as we read your words. Help us clear our minds and hearts to truly study your words until we have an indication of what you are trying to teach us. Give us patience.

God our governor, you have instituted government among us to provide for preserving law and order in our society. Bless all governing authorities, that they may be strong in confronting crime and examples themselves of good conduct. Teach us how to prevent crime and how to restore lawbreakers to lawkeepers, to do what is good, and receive your approval.

Bless all who work to restore normalcy neighborhoods damaged by natural disasters. Today we left us the people in Syria and Turkey affect by the strong earthquake this week. Send your servants to help them as they search for survivors and care for those who have survived.

Bless all schools and colleges, that our children may be wise in learning and loving in action. May they learn the appreciation of all human cultures and admiration for what is true and beautiful and good.

Lord, sustain us on our sickbed and in our illness heal all our infirmities. Have compassion on all those on our prayer list, and all others who struggle for health and wholeness. Bless all the caregivers who compassionately care for those who are searching for wholeness.

Eternal God, as of old you went in front of your people Israel to show them the way out of their oppression in

Egypt. Continue your light and wisdom for us now as we strive to follow the way of your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

1 Corinthians 3:8-9 reminds us that, "The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." What a privilege to be God's vessel and participant in kingdom nurture and care. Let us give generously knowing we have been given gifts to be used for the building.

***PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

God who gives the increase, receive these gifts and magnify them for your kingdom. Continually grow generosity in us and be glorified.

***BENEDICTION:**

May you move forward from this gathering with the good news written on your heart, faithfulness embedded in your

spirit, and God's wisdom leading your path. In righteousness, grace, and hope, be reconciled.

PRAYER LIST: Urban Baum, David Seneczyn, Cheri Schutzenhofer, Theo Mally, Becky Ballard, Rosemary Williams, Jack O'Day, Ronald Bopp, Floyd Lorenz, Mary (friend of Nancy's).

If you would like to donate to the UCC fund for disaster relief for the people affected by the earthquake in Syria and Turkey, please put your cash donation into a separate envelope OR write a check and make it out to the church and in the memo line, put Earthquake Relief. Thank you.