

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
FEBRUARY 19, 2023



“BE RECONCILED”

ST. JOHN

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

10207 Lincoln Trail

Fairview Heights, IL

Telephone 618-397-6323

e-mail– stjohnuccfairview@gmail.com

Website: www.stjohnfairview.org

Rev. Rosemary Captain

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Come, foolish people; God is calling you.

The God of all time and space wants our attention.

Many: **Why are we called foolish in the church?**

Does God think we are foolish people?

Have we embraced the world’s talk and actions?

Have we turned away from God’s expectation.

People call us foolish when we take faith seriously.

The world thinks us strange if we are different.

God says to us: You shall be holy because I am.

You shall be true and just, generous and loving.

How can God expect us to be perfect?

How can we help others if we don’t fit in?

***INVOCATION:**

God, we have come to worship you. We thought we could come on our terms, but your word proclaims your rule over this gathering and in all your creation. Help us to hear your will for us, not as limiting and oppressive but as the freeing, fulfilling pathway to life. We want to be your faithful children. We want to experience life at its best. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:**

The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God. We have become enmeshed in the world’s foolishness. We speak of rights, and plot ways to get ahead. We live among revenge-seekers who label Christ’s way impossible. Let us confess our distance from God’s design.

***PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

Gracious God, we do not understand your ways. We have forgotten that you call us to standards far different from the accepted norms of our society. We confess that we have dealt falsely with others. We have benefited from

systems that defraud many of a living wage for their labors. We have slandered people you invite us to love and hated some for whom you asked us to pray. O God, we admit that we are people of vengeance and grudges. We cry to you for help. Amen. (Silence is kept)

***ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:**

The grace of God is available to all who repent and put their trust in God. We are, each of us, God's temple. God's Spirit dwells in us, creating in us a holy place. We belong to Christ, who lifts our guilt from us that we might begin again to love ourselves and our neighbors.

***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 SCRIPTURE: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Living as holy people

19 The LORD said to Moses, **2** Say to the whole community of the Israelites: You must be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

9 When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. **10** Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the LORD your God.

11 You must not steal nor deceive nor lie to each other. **12** You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God's name in doing so; I am the LORD. **13** You must not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not withhold a hired laborer's pay overnight. **14** You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the LORD. **15** You must not act unjustly in a legal case. Do not show favoritism to the poor or deference to the great; you must judge your fellow Israelites fairly. **16** Do not go around slandering your people. Do not stand by while your neighbor's blood is shed; I am the LORD. **17** You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your fellow Israelite strongly, so you don't become responsible for his sin. **18** You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 119:33-40

Pages 702 – 703 in the back of the hymnal

EPISTLE READING: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

10 I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. **11** No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷ If someone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person, because God's temple is holy, which is what you are.

¹⁸ Don't fool yourself. If some of you think they are worldly-wise, then they should become foolish so that they can become wise. ¹⁹ This world's wisdom is foolishness to God. As it's written, *He catches the wise in their cleverness.* ²⁰ And also, *The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are silly.* ²¹ So then, no one should brag about human beings. Everything belongs to you— ²² Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, things in the present, things in the future—everything belongs to you, ²³ but you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

***GOSPEL READING: Matthew 5:38-48**

Law of retaliation

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* ³⁹ But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. ⁴⁰ When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. ⁴¹ When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Law of love

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you ⁴⁵ so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven.

He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

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 2 (With thoughts from N.T. Wright)

Last week we found out what "law" or the interpretation of "laws" Jesus was talking about when he said he would fulfill the law. We now continue our discussion of the Sermon on the Mount.

In this section of that Sermon, Jesus takes the commands of the law and show how they provide a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human. This new way, which Jesus had come to pioneer and make possible, goes deep down into the roots of personality and produces a different pattern of behavior altogether.

It begins with fuming anger against someone very close to you. All right, it may not result in murder; but the point of the commandment against murder was not that you should stop short of killing someone, but that you should never let it get near even the thought that you wish they were dead. What judgment will you incur (verse 22)? God's judgment, clearly; but this isn't simply an arbitrary

punishment that will catch up with you eventually, but rather a judgment that will begin right now.

Every time you decide to let your anger smolder on inside you, you are becoming a little less than fully human. You are deciding to belittle yourself. Of course, if you let your anger turn into foul and abusive language, sooner or later you may find yourself in court. And if you are the type of person who sneers at everybody and calls them names, the fire inside you may eventually become all that's left of you, as Gehenna – the smoldering garbage dump of ancient Jerusalem – may take you over completely.

What's the alternative? Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends. How simple that is – and yet how hugely difficult and costly! It will almost certainly involve climbing down from the high pedestal on which you placed yourself, abandoning your position of superiority over the person you're angry with. But genuine humans don't live on pedestals, they have their feet on the ground, on a level with everybody else.

Reconciliation even takes precedence over worship. Perhaps you remember when Jesus said don't go to the altar in the temple if you have a grudge with someone. Go to that person who upset you and try to reconcile with him. Then return to the temple to worship with a clean heart. There's another example when Jesus talks about taking a neighbor to court over a misunderstanding. Jesus says to try and reconcile with that person before going to court. No one "wins" in the court of his day.

By the end of the Sermon this "coded" warning becomes even more explicit. The house will fall with a great crash.

Jesus, it seems, is not simply talking about individual anger and behavior, vital though it is. He is alluding to a yet greater danger. Unless Israel learns, right now, how to be God's chosen people, how to shed God's light into the world, disaster is in store; a disaster which has its roots in personal failure to deal with anger, and its fruits in the national insistence on letting centuries of persecution justify violence.

All this is, of course, impossible. That is, it's impossible until you look at Jesus. As we continue through Matthew's story, we discover that our natural question, "How can people possibly do what he says?" is eventually answered. Jesus himself refused to go the way of anger. Instead, he took the anger of his enemies within Israel, and of Israel's own enemies, the Romans, on to himself, and died under its load. From that point on, reconciliation is not simply an ideal we might strive for. It is an achievement, an accomplishment, which we in turn must now embody.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with a time for silent personal prayer.

Holy God, we approach your throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need, not only for ourselves but for others as well. We pray that all who confess their faith in Christ in whatever region and language of the world may do so in the Spirit who is the truth of Christ. Sustain us by your Holy Spirit so that we do not grow weary in doing what is right and so

that we will reap at harvest time the fruits of our labors, if we do not give up.

We pray for the poor and the homeless, for all who are left behind and forgotten; for the defeated, the timid, the broken-hearted, and all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, especially those on our prayer list. Befriend, comfort and heal them for your name's sake. As we pray together -

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.

PRAYER RESPONSE: NCH 769

**Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God;
Incline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.**

OFFERTORY INVITATION: God expects more of believers than of nonbelievers. God delights in our joyous responses to divine generosity. Our offering proclaims our love of God and neighbor, in many different ways. Let us build on the foundations Christ has laid.

***UNISON OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

With these gifts, we express our desire to observe your law with wholeness of heart, to delight in your commandments with all that we have and are, to worship you not only when we are together but in many difficult

places when we are apart. May our church reach out to care for enemies as well as friends. May we remember that we are your church, your temple, your holy ones. Amen.

***RESPONSIVE COMMISSION AND BLESSING:**

Go forth as a holy people, filled with the Spirit.
Delight in following God's commandments.

We seek to be honest and caring.

We labor to serve, not for selfish gain.

Show love to neighbors and even to enemies.

Share God's bounty as you work for justice.

We seek to be generous and impartial.

We reach out to help, not to reap rewards.

All things belong to you in Christ.

You are gifted by God to share God's love.

We marvel at how much God trusts us!

We seek to be worthy of that trust.

Amen. Amen.