

## *World Communion Sunday*



**October 1, 2023**  
**ST. JOHN UNITED**  
**CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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**\*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: On this day, we are not a single congregation,  
**MANY: but part of all believers everywhere, every place.**

ONE: On this day, we share not just a sacrament,  
**MANY: but a feast from every time, every place of faith.**

ONE: On this day, God's people gather in house churches and cathedrals,

**MANY: and on sandy beaches and under towering trees.**

**\*PRAYER OF INVOCATION :**

In Tagalog and Turkish, in Mandarin and Maine draws, in children's whispers and seniors' forgotten word, glad songs are lifted to you, Loving God, and we join our hearts and voices in praising you.

In villages where water is more precious than gold, in prisons where humanity often disappears, in neighborhoods controlled by gangs, in residential homes for the disabled, your children cry out for justice, Servant of the poor, and we commit our hearts and lives to serving them with you.

In prayers for peace whispered by little children; in hope-filled comfort offered to those who struggle; in affirmations of unity found in neighborhoods where folks live side-by-side, not doctrines filled with jargon, you, dear God, continue to fill us with the words we need, Wisdom's Heart, and we will continue to speak them in every moment.

In this place, and in every place, with those we know, and with folks faraway, we will seek to be your people united in your heart, love, and service, we praise and worship you, Almighty God. Amen.

**\*CALL TO RECONCILIATION:**

A word of anger breaks another's heart, a church's silence damages a family, a nation's anger can bring war and destruction. As individuals, as communities, as a world, we do not live as God's people, so let us bring our lives to our God, so forgiven, we might continue to seek to become one in Christ.

**\*UNISON PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS**

**We confess, God of every person, how easy it is to think that our way of being your church is the one, true way. And so, we believe we have no reason to hear your name spoken in another language. We are sure we don't need to learn songs that have tunes which sound dissonant to us. We believe that our baptism, our communion, our beliefs are the ones closest to your heart, and so we close our hearts, eyes, and hands to those around us.**

**But we are wrong. And so we confess our sins and ask you for mercy, once again, Gracious God, and may our hearts be changed forever.**

*Silence is kept*

**\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

In little churches with wide open windows, in ancient buildings echoing with the songs and prayers of generations, in buildings that do not look like sanctuaries, the same good news is proclaimed: God is love. And that love forgives us, redeems us, restores us.

We are forgiven by our God of grace and wonder. Amen.

**SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Exodus 17:1-7**

**Water from a rock**

**17** The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the LORD commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup>The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the LORD?"<sup>3</sup> But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?" <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me." <sup>5</sup>The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. <sup>6</sup>I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah<sup>[a]</sup> and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the LORD, asking, "Is the LORD really with us or not?"

**EPISTLE LESSON: Philippians 2:1-13**

## **Imitate Christ**

**2** Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. <sup>3</sup> Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. <sup>5</sup> Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. <sup>7</sup> But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

## **Carry out your salvation**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. <sup>13</sup> God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.

## **\*GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 21:23-32**

### **Jesus' authority questioned**

<sup>23</sup> When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. They asked, "What kind of authority do you have for doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, "I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I'll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. <sup>25</sup> Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?" They argued among themselves, "If we say 'from heaven,' he'll say to us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' <sup>26</sup> But we can't say 'from humans' because we're afraid of the crowd, since everyone thinks John was a prophet." <sup>27</sup> Then they replied, "We don't know." Jesus also said to them, "Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.

### **Parable of two sons**

<sup>28</sup> "What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup> "No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> "The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, 'Yes, sir.' But he didn't go. <sup>31</sup> "Which one of these two did his father's will?" They said, "The first one."

Jesus said to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you on the righteous road, and

you didn't believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn't change your hearts and lives and you didn't believe him.

These are the ancient words  
revealed to us anew.

**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

**MESSAGE: "Who will enter God's kingdom?"**

Today we have another interesting parable. At first it sounded to me like one of those questions you get in an Ethics class. Such as you have time to save only one person in the burning building. Who should it be? To me the answer is the dog, of course.

As all parables Jesus give us, there is a lesson in there somewhere. I didn't get it at first. I was distracted by the last paragraph in this passage. "Jesus said to them, 'I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you.'" Who enters God's kingdom first?

Before we answer that, we need an accurate image of God's Kingdom and its not just something up there somewhere in the clouds. The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary says "the kingdom of God, the phenomenon of God's rule, or the realm over which God rules or will rule. In the New Testament references to the kingdom of God in Matthew, Mark, and Luke receive the most attention, because the concept seems so central to Jesus' ambiguity that has intrigued interpreters." (*that would include us.*)

The definition continues. "Jesus sayings about the kingdom of God seem to fall into at least three categories. First, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God as a reality that is already present. Secondly, Jesus also talks about the kingdom of God as an imminent future reality. In the Gospel of Mark 1:15 'It's arrival is at hand' or it 'has come near.' And thirdly, Jesus sometimes speaks of the kingdom of God as the culmination of all human history, as something that comes into existence only when heaven and earth pass away."

Another reference I read was from Mary Fairchild, a full time Christian minister and teacher. According to her, "the Kingdom of God can be summarized as the everlasting realm where God is sovereign and Jesus Christ rules forever." (*By the way, I wanted a clearer picture, so I looked up other words for sovereign which include "independent, self-governing, free, autonomous, self-determined, supreme, dominant, or absolute."*) Ms Fairchild continues, "the concept of a Kingdom of God is not primarily one of space, territory, or politics, as in a national kingdom, but instead, one of kingly rule, reign, and sovereign control; a place where God's authority is recognized, and God's will is obeyed."

Old Testament scholar Graeme Goldsworthy summarized the kingdom of God in even fewer words, "God's people in God's place under God's rule." My summary would be something like a place where everyone believes in God and loves their neighbors.

Now that we have a better image of the Kingdom of God, who gets to go near the front of the line? Today's parable explains. The first son, who rudely tells his father he doesn't feel like working today, but then does after all, stands for the tax-collectors and prostitutes. Their daily life seems to be saying "no" to God; but when they heard John the Baptist they changed their mind and their lifestyle, in other words, they repented.

The second son, who politely tells his father he will indeed go to work, but then doesn't, stands for the Temple hierarchy and other leaders. They look as though they are doing God's will, worshipping in the Temple and keeping up appearances; but they refused to believe in John's message, not only about repentance but also about the Messiah who was standing unknown in their midst. Now the Messiah himself is here to call them to account. Not surprising, they don't like it.

The challenge of this passage for us is to make sure we are responding to Jesus allowing him to confront us at any point where we have been the second son and said "yes" to God while in fact going off in another direction. Pray that it never happens to you. You might lose your place in line to the Kingdom of God. Amen.

#### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

We gather here today to be even close to you, O God. And as we celebrate Holy Communion around the world, we are closer to all our brothers and sisters around the world. Give us eyes to recognize your reflection in the

eyes of these Christians everywhere. Give us a mind to accept and celebrate our differences. Give us a heart big enough to love your children everywhere. We thank you for setting a table with space enough for us all.

God of glory and majesty, help us to see our place in your creation with humility and grace. Help us to receive your grace and love with gratitude, and let it flow through our being to everyone we meet. We pray that we might be instruments of your peace, love and compassion in our hurting world.

God of compassion, send your comfort to all those whose lives have been difficult. We pray in the blessed name of Jesus, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

**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 OF DEDICATION:**

As we offer our gifts here, a family is placing its tithe in another church. As we write our checks, a little child dumps coins from piggy bank into the basket passing down the row. As we, and they, and our sisters and brothers everywhere respond to your blessings in our

lives, may you gather them all up and use them in acts of kindness, of goodness, of justice, and of grace. This we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**\*INVITATION TO THE TABLE:**

Some come from towns we have trouble pronouncing, others have walked across the street; some gather with strangers, others are with old friends and family; some hold the bread with trembling hands, others hold their small cup with a strong grip; some need to taste hope and grace, others long for a community which welcomes them with open arms.

And all, all of us, are welcomed to this Table and every Table where the Holy Meal is celebrated this day.

For this is not the clergy's table, this is not the church's table; this is God's Table, and God turns no one away. Come, people of God; come and taste the goodness of the Lord.

**\*GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

May the God of all be with you!

**May that God be with you, as well!**

We will join our hearts with all of God's people, offering them to the God who loves us.

**God fills our hearts, our lives, with overflowing grace.**

With voices in every tongue, of every faith, we will say our praises to God.

**We offer glory and thanksgiving to our God.**

When there was nothing but your imagination, God of Wonder, you thought, and the Spirit began to twinkle chaos with stars, moons, and planets.

You spoke, and the Word began to call to life centipedes to march across the ground, sparrows to dart across skies, and little kittens to lap up milk.

You laughed, and shaped us in your image, to offer all these things and more to us. But we were convinced we did not need you, and so chose to stay wrapped in our little cocoons spun by sin and death.

Over and over, in dusty streets and urban centers, your prophets call us back to you, but we were set in our ways, not wanting to walk by your rivers of life.

So that we might finally have life with you, you sent your Child to us, so that all the world might be redeemed.

With those whose hearts are filled with joy, with those whose lips tremble with questions, we lift our praises to you:

**Holy, holy, holy are you, God of all, God of each.**

**All creation everywhere joins in praising you. Hosanna in the highest!**

**Blessed is the One who calls us to the Table of life. Hosanna in the highest!**

In your holiness, God of creation, you could have stayed aloof, letting the world drift back into chaos. But you

became one of us, in a little child born in a place no one imagined, and to a family none would have picked.

A little child, Jesus knew the hunger and fears of poverty and despair.

A young boy, Jesus knew the doubts and questions of wondering about the future.

A worker, Jesus knew the struggles to put food on the table.

A storyteller, Jesus knew how to reach the deepest depths of the human heart.

A servant, Jesus was willing to take on our death for us, so that in the power of the resurrection, sin and death lost their power over us.

As we gather in grand churches and in open fields, as we feast on the finest bread, and drink from small cups, we join our sisters and brothers in every place, proclaiming the mystery:

**Jesus died, so we might know the depths of love;**

**Jesus was raised, so we might know the strength of love;**

**Jesus will come, so we might know God's steadfast love for us.**

At altars carved from marble and tables shoved together, with people who are at the feast every time it is served, as well as those just stopping in, we pray that you would pour out your Spirit upon your children and on the gifts

gathered from the simple goodness of creation and set aside for holy use.

In the bread which is broken, may we be reminded of those places like Palestine and Israel torn apart by ancient and modern fears; may we be strengthened to bring hope and help to flooded communities and those affected by all types of natural disasters.

In that cup which is filled with grace, may we be called to welcome those who have been forced to flee from the neighborhoods they loved, but now fear; may we gather up children who have been forgotten, to be blessed by their resilience; may we commit ourselves to ending injustice in every place, in every person.

And when all time has ended and the world as we know it is made complete,  
we will gather around that One Table  
of grace, hope, peace, and love with  
sisters and brothers of every time and place, forever  
praising your name  
God of the world, Holy in One. Amen.

## SHARING THE ELEMENTS

### **Sending**

We will go now to share God's love with all.

**Whether in our neighborhoods or in other places,  
we will care for others in God's name.**

We will go now to join in offering the grace of Jesus to all.

**We will join the Servant of all in seeking justice and hope for everyone.**

We will go now, knowing we are one people in the gift of the Spirit.

**We will bring peace to places torn apart by violence; we will help to rebuild lives damaged by fear and hate.**