

SUNDAY, September 8, 2024 "Love Me, Love Others, Love Yourself"

Proverbs 22:1-2. 8-9. 22-23 James 2:1-13 Mark 7:24-37

Welcome everyone. Welcome, welcome, one and all. Thank you for being here today! Your presence makes a difference in all of our lives because you matter to all others who are here! We are here to worship God together both in person and online. This is the primary purpose of this church—to offer God our praise and thanksgiving for the gift of His Son Jesus Christ and the hope and promise of eternal life. Through God's Spirit which is moving amongst us now, we seek strength and guidance as we live out our days.

So welcome--it is good to see you. How are you? It's been a while since you were here! So let's just take a moment and look around us—who is here that you know, that may look familiar, that have been friends for many years or friends you have not yet met!

It is good to worship God together for we are alive and so is Christ Jesus our Saviour! We are alive and because of this, we may breathe in and out, and are connected in this moment of our lives! But this is just one way we are connected for our reading from Proverbs 22 tells us that no matter who we are, or from where we come or whatever may divide us is not important; because what we have in common is God is our Maker, the creator of us all! And it is a great thing to do- that is, call each other brothers and sisters and friends in Christ!

For when we do this we are acknowledging a few things about each other: 1) that we are equal before God. That is, we are alike. We have all sinned, sought or seek forgiveness and search for the Spirit's blessing upon our lives. And we have been called to offer God our praise and glory and to serve others in Jesus' name and we have been forgiven through Jesus and 2) We are different—we have different experiences in life not only in numbers of years, but in what Jesus has done for us. Because when we accept and acknowledge Jesus as Saviour we are saying we belong to him and we want to live the way he taught us to live.

3) We are called to faithful service in Jesus' name. We all cannot do the same things as we serve Jesus- because God has given us many different gifts, talents and abilities but we are all called to faithful service.

And when we are called to serve faithfully we need to do so with love and with hope. James writes to the followers of Jesus of behaviours that have been noticed which go against Christ's way of love. Favouritism.. is not preferring strawberry over chocolate ice cream but looking at everyone as individuals who gather and give preferential treatment to some and not

others. All are to be welcomed equally. Those who are poor are rich in faith, those who are rich often oppress others. What James writes describes some actions that occur without knowledge of or truly caring. Favoritism is shown to those well dressed with fine clothing and jewels. But what about those who are rich in knowledge and living, following Jesus' way of love?

What if any notable celebrity walked into the church where would we have them sit? Would others have to move? Why? Are we not all sinners/ forgiven in Christ? Why are there exceptions- made?

He then continues by stating: You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". Live faithful lives and you will be given mercy. But you must do so with conviction, patience, and faith.

In our reading from Mark 7, Jesus attempts to find some quiet time and space alone but fails when a woman whose daughter has an unclean spirit finds him. We cannot define "unclean spirit" but it could be a concern regarding the physical health of the girl. Or with our learning more and more about mental health issues today, this might have been the situation here. This woman was a Gentile who had come to see Jesus. She is Syrophenician representing someone on the borders between Jews and gentiles and is begging Jesus to free her demon-possessed daughter. The disciples beg Jesus to send her away. Jesus tells the woman what his purpose was; "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". That is, Jesus rejects the woman's request to heal her daughter because she is not Jewish. He states, Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Yet this woman was persistent and stated, "Sir, even the dogs under the table, eat the children's crumbs." In this statement, she changed his mind, thereby opening Jesus to a widening ministry to Gentiles. He then heals the girl from a distance.

Jesus' ministry has just be expanded because the woman challenged him, believed in him, and was persistent in her faith. Jesus came to the Jews first-- but this woman now says all need to hear his message and be healed. Persistence.

As we enter this new academic year, we need to keep in mind our purpose, our reason to serve Christ, and why we are doing what we do as a church family. We who are here know that we have sinned, are forgiven and willing to try again to live as Christ's people in faith. But we also realize that there are many people searching, in pain, wondering, lost and have no idea how living life in Christ does make a difference. They are searching and cannot leave what is familiar much like the buzzard, bat and the bee.

If you put a buzzard in a pen that is 6 feet by 8 feet and is entirely open at the top, the bird, in spite of its ability to fly, will be an absolute prisoner. The reason is that a buzzard always begins a flight from the ground with a run of 10 to 12 feet. Without space to run, as is its habit, it will not even attempt to fly, but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top. It needs to run to take off into the air. It needs space to prepare to soar. And for some people life is like this. Trapped in an enclosure looking out but only into darkness.

The bat which flies around at night, is a remarkable nimble creature in the air, but it cannot take off from a level place. If it is placed on the floor or flat ground, all it can do is shuffle about helplessly and, no doubt, painfully, until it reaches some slight elevation from which it can throw itself into the air. Then, at once, it takes off like a flash. Like the buzzard it needs space to move; an upper ledge upon which it can have lift off. It needs a boost in height to take off. And for some people life is like this-- they can only see to the horizon, that there is no hope of moving to a higher ground where they may take off, but also be safe.

A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler, will be there until it dies, unless it is taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides or near the bottom of the container. It seeks a way out where none exists, persistently yes, until it completely destroys itself. And there are people like this who can see possibilities or challenges for their lives but have no clue as to what to do.

In many ways, we are like the buzzard, the bat, and the bumblebee. We struggle about with all our problems and frustrations, never realizing that all we have to do is look up! To find that there is no roof on the cage, a ledge to a higher ground and a means to escape.

As Christians we need to do the same-- to just look up- to see God's face in others, to experience the love we may receive from others and from Christ Jesus. But we need to love ourselves too. We need to look up to God who will welcome us as his children no matter what we have done. God's Spirit will guide us in new ways and we can again love Jesus, Love others and love ourselves for our hope is in Christ. We no longer have to be searching-- for the way of life is in Jesus. He has called us by name, it is up to us to answer His call to faith and service. This is the reason we welcome one another with Christ's peace. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Loving Christ, Others and ourselves is foundational for our faithful service to you. Show us O God your way to be faithful and caring of all whom we care as our church family. Enable us to praise you as we begin anew journey of learning in this academic year. Show us your way o God and remind us always that you are with us no matter where we go or what we say and do.

Hear our prayers O God.. SILENCE. AMEN>