

Order of Worship

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, November 8, 2020

WELCOME

PRELUDE *Agincourt Hymn* J. Dunstaple/arr. E.P. Biggs

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 72:1-8, 12-14, 17 UMH p. 795

HYMN 157 *Jesus Shall Reign* DUKE STREET

SCRIPTURE 2 Chronicles 7:14-15; 33:10-13

PASTORAL PRAYER AND 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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 496 *Sweet Hour of Prayer* SWEET HOUR

SCRIPTURE Matthew 6:5-8

MESSAGE Pastor Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 526 *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* CONVERSE

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Cornet Voluntary* S. Goodwin

WHAT IF...We Humble Ourselves and Pray?

There are a lot of “what if’s” that we ask ourselves. What if we or our loved ones get sick? What if our personal and/or our country’s economy falls apart? What if we feel too worn out to get through tough times? In the daily devotion I post on our church’s Facebook page, on Tuesday was a reminder about Jesus’ promise that *“In this world you will have trouble”*. It’s not exactly an encouraging promise that you stencil on a rustic plank of wood and hang on your

wall. Thankfully John 16:33 completes that phrase with, “*but take heart, for I have overcome the world.*”

Today we’re beginning a short 3-week series on how to turn our troubling and fear-based “What If’s” into “What If’s” filled with possibility and realistic hope to overcome the fears and problems in our world. Today we begin where we often end up as our last resort – prayer.

Prayer is sometimes seen, even by many Christians, as an escape from reality or responsibility. We must un-learn that false understanding of prayer. Unlearning requires humility, which is also what the Bible repeatedly describes as the first step for real prayer. “*If my people who are called by my name **humble themselves**, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.*” - 2 Chronicles 7:14-15

Proverbs 22:4 says, “*The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.*” But what exactly is humility? How do we *really* humble ourselves? I like C.S. Lewis’ definition: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.” It is a deep shift from focusing on how to build and preserve our personal comfort and ego to thinking more about how you are called to pray and work toward building God’s Kingdom of peace and righteousness for all. It may not look like the world’s definition of riches and honor and life, but it has the eternal benefits of heavenly riches, honor, and eternal life.

Sometimes God’s mercy allows us to experience troubles so that our hearts will be humbled. In 2 Chronicles 33, King Manasseh and the Israelites were focusing on themselves and ignoring God. So God allowed the Assyrians to kidnap him and jail him in Babylon. “*While he was in distress he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty, heard his plea, and restored him again to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD indeed was God.*” (vs. 11-13)

In Matthew 6, Jesus tells a story about the Pharisees who prayed to gain attention for themselves, the very opposite of humility. The point Jesus was making wasn’t to tell us that we can’t pray out loud or in public. He’s explaining that praying can only reach God’s

ears if our hearts are in the right place. Jesus then goes on to teach us how to pray. It includes basics like *“Thy (not my) will be done.”*

In John 3:30, Jesus also models the attitude of humility necessary for true prayer. He says, *“He (the Father) must become greater, I must become less”*. Humility is not groveling in weakness. Humility is recognizing and trusting that God’s strength, truth, and care is greater than we could ever ask or imagine.

After we grow in authentic humility that leads to real prayer, we discover what it means to ***“seek God’s face”***. There are two tender lines from the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” that sing out what that means. “With such I hasten to the place where God my Savior shows his face” and “And since he bids me seek his face, believe his word, and trust his grace” (by William Walford, 1845). 1 Chronicles 22:19 says, *“Now set your heart and soul to seek the Lord your God”*. 1 Corinthians 13:12 promises, *“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.”* Colossians 3:1-2 teaches us, *“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*

But isn’t that denying reality? Isn’t that stepping into the realm of being “so heavenly-minded that you’re no earthly-good?” All of us have likely misunderstood and even contorted scripture to justify many things at least once in our lives. Perhaps the first hymn we sang can help us understand. “Blessings abound where’er he reigns; all prisoners leap and loose their chains; the weary find eternal rest, and all who suffer want are blest.” (by Isaac Watts, 1719).

When our prayers are for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we look to the perfection of heaven to learn what and how we are to work to make that happen on earth. The eternal realm points us in prayer and to action in this earthly realm. We hear and follow the calling to be filled with the Spirit and be *“sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”* (Isaiah 61:1-2) That sounds like a lot of earthly good that offers real hope and makes a big difference!

As we learn to humble ourselves and seek God in prayer, there is yet another reminder to ***“turn from our wicked ways”***. But wicked describes the witch of the west of Oz – not any of us! Actually, it

includes me and you, too. Think of wicked as also describing our human weaknesses, insecurities, and brokenness. Wickedness is a wall of separation that we erect between ourselves and God. Sometimes it is easy to see in ourselves and others, but we often become experts at hiding it from others and God. God instructs the prophet Ezekiel to speak these words on God's behalf: *"You are saying, 'Our sins are heavy upon us; we are wasting away! How can we survive?' As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live.* (Ezekiel 33:10-11)

It is our human condition, broken by sin, that tends to try to avoid God rather than approach God's throne of grace and healing with confidence. Just like Adam and Eve, we are afraid and try to hide from God. We think, "What if God punishes me?" "What if other people don't accept me anymore?" "What if my shame and weakness defines me?" God told Ezekiel exactly what to say to those fears in people: *"Son of man, give your people this message: The righteous behavior of righteous people will not save them if they turn to sin, nor will the wicked behavior of wicked people destroy them if they repent and turn from their sins. When I tell righteous people that they will live, but then they sin, expecting their past righteousness to save them, then none of their righteous acts will be remembered. I will destroy them for their sins. And suppose I tell some wicked people that they will surely die, but then they turn from their sins and do what is just and right. For instance, they might give back a debtor's security, return what they have stolen, and obey my life-giving laws, no longer doing what is evil. If they do this, then they will surely live and not die. None of their past sins will be brought up again, for they have done what is just and right, and they will surely live."* Ezek. 33:12-16

What if we humble ourselves? What if we seek God's face? What if we turn from our wickedness? *"I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place."* (2 Chronicles 7:14-15) "This place" used to refer to the temple. Through Christ, we are now God's temple! We can live and pray with forgiveness, freedom, boldness, and blessing! Our fear-based "what if's" are transformed into prayerful "what if's" of faith and hope. And our hearts will be filled with the love of our friend, Jesus. He knows our every weakness, so let's take it all to the Lord in prayer!