



Seacliff Uniting Church

Online Worship Notes

Sunday, 12th July 2020

Pentecost 6



Call to worship

Well Hello again, and welcome to worship at Seacliff on this occasion – to those present at this recording time, to those watching the video at whatever time: greetings to you all.

From the Jewish song book, the Psalm set for today is #119 – you may recall that's the one with 176 verses.

Starting at verse 1, here are just a few:

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk according to the Lord's way of life.

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Your decrees are my heritage for ever;
they are the joy of my heart.

Words of healing and hope

Song ATFG 530 – Healing is Flowing (verses 1 and 4 only)

1. Healing is flowing, deep in the waters,
flowing from Eden, flowing from old.
All through creation, God sends forth waters,
oceans of healing for all the world.

4. Healing is given, flows from forgiveness,
healing is given, flows from our faith.
Christ, give us heart to love your deep healing,
living forgiveness, even in death.

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Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Gracious Lord, we praise you for your creation, and give thanks for your constant presence.
Loving Jesus, we look to your example of goodness and grace, and accept the invitation to follow you.

Whispering Spirit, we listen for your encouragement and guidance, and open our hearts to your strength and love.

God at this time we also open our hearts to you in confession. We bring to you the hurt we have felt, and the hurt we have caused. We bring to you the harshness in our words, the selfishness in our actions, and the apathy in our hearts.

Lord, let our hurt be transformed by your healing. Let our harshness be softened by your grace.

Let our selfishness be humbled by your servant heart. Let our apathy be melted away by the Spirit's fire. Lord, forgive us.

Sisters and brothers, God is eternally loving and abundantly gracious. By the power of the Holy Spirit, let us live into that love and grace. Our sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Message part 1

My daughter Margot is nearly seven. Now maybe this is a little maternal bias, but she is a funny little thing who is an absolute delight to talk with. She tends to talk non-stop, and comes out with some ripper questions about life, the universe and everything.

And you know what, having a nearly-seven-year-old in your life asking these questions that we take for granted is so refreshing. Because not only are their questions often so piercing and direct and curious, but we also have to provide an answer in simple terms so that they can understand it – and sometimes, it helps us understand things better too.

My favourite recent questions which have come from Margot are, “how can we hear God talking?” and “what does God look like?” They caught me off-guard (and I suspect they were a delay technique as she was supposed to be asleep when she asked them...)

I answered somewhere along the lines of, “God is love, and we hear him talking through the loving words and actions of other people.”

But she really got me thinking later on, after she finally went to bed. What does God look like? And I think Paul shows us, in today's reading from Romans, what God looks like, and how we can hear God talking, through what Paul calls the law of the Spirit. And it's in direct contrast to what he calls the law of sin and death.

Going back a bit, to the end of chapter 7, Paul expresses despair, recognising the constant struggle when we submit to that law of sin and death:

I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't.

I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

Boy, does the Bible keep it FRESH. I'm the first to admit, to confess, that as a lazy, impatient people-pleaser, that passage SPEAKS to me. Doing what you know you shouldn't, and not doing the things you know you should be doing.

Only a few days after I last preached for you in April, I was made redundant from my full-time job, thanks largely to COVID-19. I have sorely missed the structure and routine that having a full-time job provides, and I find myself slipping into that “do what you know you shouldn't, and don't do what you know you should” lifestyle. There's been a lot of, shall we

say, housework-ignoring, and a lot of, shall we say, couch-sitting, and a lot of, shall we say, TV-watching. But enough about me.

Submitting to the law of sin and death – measuring your life by those standards – is a futile existence. No matter how hard you try, any attempt to live righteously and perfectly by the law at all times is going to fail. If that is the standard by which you live your life, you can really appreciate Paul's despair as he exclaims, on behalf of us all, *Oh what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?* Thankfully the answer is right there in the next verse – *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

A righteous existence by our own means is impossible, and attempting it is futile. But thank God for Jesus! Through Jesus, we no longer measure our lives by the law of sin and death, but by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Scripture **Matthew 13:1-9**

Romans 8:1-11

Message part 2

And what does the law of the Spirit look like, or in Margot's words, what does God look like?

God looks like freedom.

We see God freeing us from that futile, miserable existence of measuring our lives by the law of sin and death. God claims victory over sin and death for us, by his son Jesus, and so we are no longer controlled by our sin. In theory keeping the law perfectly will absolve our sins, but that is just not something we can do. Verse 3 is great – *The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. **So God did what the law could not do.** He sent his own son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his son as a sacrifice for our sins.*

There's no comparison here. The law could not do what God can do, what God *did*. God is more powerful than the law. Who God is, is more powerful than the law. And God freed us from the law. John 8:31-32 – *Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "**You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**"* That truth is that the law is not all-powerful; only God is. Knowing that God alone has the power to save us, through Jesus, *that* is the truth that sets us free, the truth that gives us freedom.

No longer are we held to the impossible standards of the law. No longer are we burdened with the crushing weight of guilt and sin. In Jesus, God cut the chains that bound us to the law, to sin. We aren't held to the law; we are held *by* God. We aren't burdened by guilt and sin; we are *free from it*. **God looks like freedom.** And because we are free...

God looks like life.

Through Jesus, God frees us and sets our sights on life, not on death. Verse 6 – *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.* Because we have been freed from sin and death by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, that's not our focus anymore. We are not focused on sin; we are focused on life. Moreover, we are focused on the life that God gives us, a life not controlled by worldly standards. John 10:10, Jesus says he came that we may have not just life, but *abundant* life.

There is a well-known section in the United States Declaration of Independence that says that *our Creator has endowed us with such rights as Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.* But from a practical and socioeconomic standpoint, “the pursuit of happiness” is not something that can really be embraced by people living near or in poverty, by people living under oppressive rule, by people constantly facing discrimination and injustice. My husband Aaron is American, and we lived in the US after we were first married. For various reasons we were living in near-poverty for most of that time, barely scraping by. At one point we were working five jobs between the two of us, and still hardly had a chance to catch our figurative breaths, let alone actively pursue the things that brought happiness and joy.

I think “the pursuit of happiness” is a good symbolic approximation of “abundant life,” and we have not been granted freedom from sin and death so that we can live an impoverished, oppressed, unjust life. The life to which God calls us is beyond the life that the world can offer, regardless of our actual circumstances. Revelations 21:4-5 – *he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away... see I am making all things new.* This is the life that God is; this is the life God offers. A life free from sadness and pain and death. Because of the freedom God gives us, we know life in Christ.

And because God gives us this freedom, and because we embrace abundant life through Christ, we know peace.

God looks like peace.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 – *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways.* God looks like peace, and he gives us peace. Peace is such an integral part of who God is. It is one of the words used in the prophecy about Jesus in Isaiah 9 – the Prince of Peace. All of Paul's letters, as well as most of the other letters, begin with some version of “grace and peace to you from God our Father,” as well as a few of the other epistles. Peace is a defining feature of who God is.

And what is that peace? The peace of God is knowing that there is no need to frantically earn our freedom. The peace of God is knowing that there is no circumstance in our life that can take us away from the abundant life that Jesus promised. This is what peace looks like. Romans 8:14 – *for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.* We can be at peace, knowing that we are held in the grace of God, as his very own children.

So we know what God looks like. We see the law of the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus, in action, when we see freedom, life, and peace on display in the world.

Freedom is evident in governments ensuring their citizens are treated with equality, compassion and justice, rather than oppression, indifference and discrimination.

Life is evident when we see an inclusive and diverse society embracing one another as they are, instead of insisting on an echo chamber of sameness.

Peace is evident when we reach out to speak and listen to others with love and kindness, instead of fear and reservation.

That's what God looks like. Is that what we look like?

Song TiS 421 – Where the Spirit is, there's freedom

Where the Spirit is, there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

1. Not by the world can our freedom be nourished,
Not by our things, only by Spirit.
Practice, my children, to live by the Spirit,
drop all your masks, take freedom's clothing!

Where the Spirit is, there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

2. Heaven on earth, here we live, free to
love and to share, carried by joy.
Practice, my children, to live by the Spirit,
daring today to taste God's future!

Where the Spirit is, there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

3. Wounds will be healed, eyes will be opened,
Imaging God, reflecting Jesus.
Practice, my children, to live by the Spirit,
heaven is here, time made eternal!

Where the Spirit is, there's freedom.

Where the Spirit is, there is life!

Together in Song © Per Gunnar Harling
World Council of Churches, Geneva)

Offering Prayer

For every good thing that comes to us from you, God, we give our grateful thanks.
For showing us how, and enabling us, to care for each other in recent times, we thank you.

We bring these gifts of money; we bring the other ways we support this church financially and with our time and work.

We bring everything we have and all that we are, for the sake of your world in which we live.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

There are several people, members of this congregation, who are living with health or injury issues at the moment. I cannot put people's names on the video – suffice to say for now that the people concerned are either going OK, or in a wait-and-see stage. So as we bring our prayers for our world, we will include these people.

So let us pray.

Where the Spirit is, there's freedom. Wounds will be healed, eyes will be opened.

Our gracious God, hear our prayers for our world – how we need your Spirit of grace and compassion to be at work.

If we must confess that we have been so distracted by the pandemic's effects on us that we have forgotten the abused, the elbowed-aside, the disregarded of our world, gracious God forgive us.

Where we are able to raise a voice against racism or sexual harassment, grant us courage to speak.

Where we are able to provide material assistance to people in need, grant us generous hearts and open wallets.

Where we encounter opinion and argument that challenge our established attitudes and prejudices, open us to the command of Jesus: Let anyone with ears listen!

Creator Spirit, Breath of Life, awaken us to your call on our lives.

Hear our prayers for our friends here who are in need – the physical needs we know about, the ones in fear of how the world is at the moment, the lonely, especially those who live alone and are under orders not to go out. Be present for them, we pray, with comfort, courage, the assurance of your love. Open our eyes to see where you are calling us to be your hands, your presence in their lives.

And we say together:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Song TIS 430 Your words to me are life and health George Currie Martin

1

Your words to me are life and health;
pour strength into my soul;
enable, guide and teach my heart
to reach its perfect goal.

2

Your words to me are light and truth;
from day to day they show
their wisdom, passing human thought,
as in their truth I grow.

3

Your words to me are full of joy,
of beauty, peace and grace;
from them I learn your blessed will,
through them I see your face.

4

Your words are perfected in One,
yourself, the living Word;
within my heart your image print
in clearest lines, O Lord.

Blessing

A Benediction, by Bishop Woodie White:

*And now, may the Lord torment you.
May the Lord keep before you
the faces of the hungry, the lonely,
the rejected and the despised.
May the Lord afflict you with pain
for the hurt, the wounded, the oppressed,
the abused, the victims of violence.
May God grace you with
a burning thirst for justice and righteousness.
May the Lord give you courage and strength and compassion
to make ours a better world,
to make your community a better community,
to make your church a better church.
May you do your best to make it so;
and after you have done your best,
may the Lord grant you peace.
Amen.*
