

# Worship Service “Where Is The Love?”

Pentecost 15, Sunday, Year A

10<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Romans 13:8-14 NRSVUE / Matthew 18:15-20 NRSVUE

## Prelude

Opening Music (video) [\*Will You Let Me Be Your Servant\* \(The Servant Song\)](#),  
performed by Mutual Kumquat, used with permission

## Welcome/Announcements

### Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn     *Here in this place*                     6

## Call to Worship

People of God, open your eyes! Look around!

The presence of our Lord Jesus Christ is here—among us and within us.

God’s salvation is close at hand—nearer than you know.

So open your hearts and minds to the Spirit, and let’s worship God together!

## Invocation

We long to find a place to relax, O God, to lean into the welcome and the love of real friends who stay true no matter who we are or what we’ve done.

We want to be known – not just our names, but ourselves, our dreams and longings, our fears and failings and be warmly, unrestrainedly welcomed.

We yearn to know the joy of opening our arms to others and seeing them melt and grow soft in the safety of our acceptance. And you have created a place like this for us a place of people, with failings and disagreements who still look out for one another; a place of difference and struggle where we can all belong; a place of faith and deep doubt, a place of awkward stumbling toward Christlikeness; a place of worship, of mystery and of rest.

And though we can’t always see it, although sometimes it doesn’t feel like it; this is the place – here. Not the buildings and the furniture – no, these people who gather each week in your name and try so hard to remember each other’s

And for this place, and your being with us We give our heartfelt gratitude and devotion. Amen.

**In our Epistle reading this morning from Romans, Paul discusses the importance of love to faith and our walk with Christ. As we listen to these words, let's reflect the place the agape love of others plays in our own lives.**

## **Epistle Reading     Romans 13:8-14 NRSVUE**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; You shall not steal; you shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off[a] the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;

let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

## **A Time of Prayer**

### **Joys and Concerns**

#### **Pastoral Prayer** *(ending with the Lord's Prayer)*

Gracious God,

When we hold out our hands to be cuffed by loneliness, you clasp our wrists to pull us into your heart. When our lives are shattered by the injustices done to those passed over by the world, your love puts us back together, so we can serve them with your hope. Emancipating God, we praise you!

When we would build walls between us and our neighbors, you come to be the welcoming gate. When we would curse someone who has hurt us in our souls, you sing us songs of blessing. When we would focus only on our needs and our desires, you hand us the dinnerware and ask us to set the Table. Ever-near Salvation, we would follow you!

When we would feed on our bitter brokenness, you would offer us the Bread of reconciliation. When we would grasp the Cup of peace, and drink it to the last drop, you whisper, 'offer some to those you don't like.' Liberating Spirit, we would be filled with you!

God in Community, Holy in One, free us of all fears and doubts, as we pray as Jesus has taught us,

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## **Our Father who is in heaven,**

Hallowed be your name. Your kin-dom come, your 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 yours is the kin-dom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

**Hymn                      *In Christ there is no East or West*                      306**

**Our gospel lesson this morning deals with how the community of faith should handle situations where members have suffered harm through the actions of another. As we listen to these words, let's think about how we handle conflict in the church today, and how we do or do not address the injuries that conflict causes.**

## **Gospel Lesson                      Matthew 18:15-20 NRSVUE**

"If your brother or sister sins against you, [a] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one.

But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

## **Message**      *Where Is The Love?*

I'm sure most of us are familiar with that classic standard of the Beatles, "All You Need Is Love." A catchy tune and simple message, "love is all you need." When we think of love, we often think of the warm fuzzies we get from romantic love, or our love of our children and family. Songs like these often make us smile and remember those warm interactions from our lives. Love is often an important part of our lives, and when we are lacking in love, we often struggle.

The importance of love also carries into our faith lives. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, love is often equated with the Divine. The theme of "God is love" is found throughout the epistles of the New Testament. Yet the love referenced in the scriptures is more than the warmth we feel for another. It actually is focused entirely on another. Called agape love, it is solely concerned with the well-being of others. It is being willing to make sacrifices yourself for the welfare of another. Certainly it is not exclusive of other forms of love. When we love our partner or our family, we are usually willing to make sacrifices to ensure their well-being. Yet agape love really is about the other person. It's being able to let go of your own self-interest to attend to the needs of another.

Our gospel lesson this morning illustrates the interaction between the love we are called to and our relationships with others. Written during the development of the early church, our gospel writer recognizes the reality of conflict in the church, and how that discord can affect the body as a whole. It's important to understand that this isn't just a disagreement over points of view or perspectives. Those kinds of disagreements are just a fact of life in a world full of unique individuals who see the world from their own understanding, based on their life experiences and circumstances. What is referenced here is something more serious. To sin against someone is to in some way cause them harm. This is more than just a common argument, this is action that will cause the offended party to suffer in some way. This is behavior that threatens the stability of the community itself. It's an acknowledgment that while we may be called to suffer at the hands of the secular world for our faith, the body of Christ should be something in contrast to what the world has to offer, a place of safety and security. And when that sanctuary is threatened by a member of the body, the situation needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, this passage has been used too often throughout history as a guidebook for punitive discipline by the authorities of the church.

Our own Anabaptist tradition has a long history of enacting the "ban" against those who fail to follow our doctrine and practices, being seen as threats to the rules and regulations that ensure conformity and unity. However, what is being addressed here is a much more personal focus. This looks at the perspective of one individual directly leading to harm against another, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Behavior that if allowed to continue will cause further harm, and could impact the larger community. Yet is this procedure meant to be the punitive process it has so frequently become over time? Or is that the easier way out, to just cast aside the problem?

To interpret this as a punitive process is to lose its original perspective. In first century Palestine, honor was everything. It determined one's place in society and one's acceptance by others. To publicly shame someone was to make them outcast and could affect their families for generations. Recognizing this, our gospel instructs us to try to resolve this one on one. To take the offender aside and express the harm they have caused, and seek restoration and redemption. Then to just involve a few others if that is unsuccessful. It is only after multiple attempts at resolution do you involve the entire community and risk shame. And even if redemption is not found at that point, the result is not to ostracize and banish them permanently from the fold.

Our scripture tells us that if all attempts have failed, they should be as “an unbeliever”, in other words, a Gentile, or a “tax collector.” Does that mean they are to be driven away and separated from us? I think we would be hard-pressed to make that argument in light of who Jesus chose to spend his time with. He was frequently in the company of tax collectors and Gentiles. There was no one beyond his love and compassion, reflecting the love and grace of our Creator. If anything, he spent more time with them because they were in greater need of that caring love. Because that's what it ultimately boils down to, agape love. Letting go of your own desire for retribution to work at redeeming another. Forgiveness at its finest. The implication, however, is not that you accept the harmful actions of another, but that you do not let it replace your concern for the other, that you seek the restoration of the other which leads to their redemption and acknowledgment of how their actions have caused harm. Christian forgiveness is not easy, but essential not only for the other, but just as much for yourself. Letting go of bitterness lifts the burden off your own soul yet doesn't absolve the other of accountability. This entire process is focused on being accountable, but through love and redemption, not retribution and revenge.

Paul reinforces this love focus in our reading from Romans this morning. He tells us that if “If you love others, you have done all that the law demands...no one who loves others will harm them.” Yet have we really committed ourselves to that criteria as the body of Christ today? Do our actions reflect love, or do they lead to harm? The bigger church today is certainly not without its disagreements and division. The viewpoints expressed reflect a wide spectrum of theological and interpretive perspectives. Even in Jesus' time, the Jewish faith was far from uniform in belief and ideology. There's a reason we know the terms Pharisee, Sadducee, Essene, scribe, etc. These were all groups of different faith perspectives within the greater faith. Groups that often had lively debates with each other, and within their own groups. There is a rich tradition of discussion and debate within the history of Judaism. So it is natural for our own tradition and the early church to follow suit. But as I mentioned before, there is a difference between arguing the finer points of theology and biblical interpretation, and actions that lead to causing harm, or “sinning against” another.

When your ideology leads to injury of another, you have crossed that line. It is no longer about love. Unfortunately, too often we have allowed such perspectives to cause harm

under the guise of being tolerant. However, such “tolerance” often leads to “intolerance,” and “exclusion,” hurt and harm. When we think of the issues that divide the church today, do we focus on the hurt caused or the tolerance of the argument? Do we pull those aside who promote hurtful doctrine as Matthew 18 instructs? Or do we allow the focus to be on the potential perceived inadequacies of individuals and spend our time waxing philosophically and theologically? Is our focus on ourselves or on the needs of the other? Nobody likes conflict. We all yearn for unity and uniformity. It makes things so much easier and more comfortable. But it comes at a cost. Someone pays a price. A cost they shouldn't have to count within the body of Christ. And sadly, unlike the direction of our Matthew 18 scripture, we let them be excluded, we let them walk away, injured and without justice, instead of seeking to redress and redeem those who caused them harm. To quote a song I've played a few times now in worship by the Black Eyed Peas, “do we practice what we preach...where is the love?” When the church today is faced with hurtful conflict, how do we react? Is our focus love, or is it something else? I hope and pray we choose the same lens as our Savior, the one who taught us what love really means, and what forgiveness and redemption truly imply. Amen.

## **Call to Serve.**

As we listen to this interlude and prepare to share communion together, let's give some thought how we should express the love we are called to live in our lives with each other.

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **A Time of Communion** *(See insert)*

#### **Invitation to the Table** *(Responsive)*

One: Friends, what we are about to do is to celebrate the Joyful Feast of the people of God.

**All: When we are able, with the Holy One, to experience the vision of Love for God's Global Village. here on earth – then all of creation will come as equal companions to sit at this table.**

One: In the meantime, you and I are invited to eat and drink, to be nourished and renewed for the ongoing work of justice, embracing mercy and walking humbly with God.

**All: This is an open table, all are welcome, no exceptions.**

## Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Responsive)

One: Holy One, One of many names and faces, we thank you for how the light came out of darkness, for the division of the waters and dry land, for creating the whole planet up and through the cosmos and calling it sacred.

**All: We thank you for creating us in your image, to live connected with Love, for the gift of life, speech, and movement and freedom to live in Your Way.**

One: Moses revealed your vision in commandments. Your prophets unleashed cries for justice when your planet's beauty was violated.

**All: Through long generations we have ebbed and flowed with suffering and sorrow, healing and renewal. In the most beautiful and oppressive of times, You still called us beloved.**

One: You are full of wonder and awe, O God. Your ways are just and prophetic. With all of creation in all times and places, with our brothers and sisters around your planet we sing to you in one voice:

**All: *Holy, holy, holy, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God. Hosanna in the highest.***

One: Holy God, Creator of milk and honey, of wheat and grapes, this table has over time been a symbol of restoration and community, a call to Remembrance. Draw us into thanksgiving for the gift of receiving your holy welcome and the powerful memory of the justice work of the radical rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus.

**All: We share bread and wine from your global planet, symbolizing the suffering and beauty, and the need for freedom on every mountain, in every river, on land, and sea, in village, farm land, town and city.**

One: As we consume the bread and cup of community, root us firmly in your vision of justice, intended for Your One Body. Let its flavor move us to a commitment to share such welcome and hospitality with all who live and breathe on your planet.

**All: As we drink the cup and consume the bread, may your Spirit be with Us, enlivening us with courage and hope to join together in the sacred work of restoring your planet.**

## Words of Institution

On the night before Jesus was betrayed, he sat at a table with his closest companions. He took a loaf and blessed it in a way those at the table had never heard before. After the blessing, he broke the bread and said, "Take. Eat. All of you. This is the bread of the Body, exiled, silenced, broken, beaten and executed. This is my body broken for you. When you eat of this, do it in remembrance of me."

In the same way after supper, while Jesus was still at table, he took a cup, and he blessed it. After the blessing he said, "Take this and divide it among all of you. This is the blood of community. Blood shed in war and in homes. Blood that carries the memories of beauty and justice. Blood that flows with new beginnings for God's One, Holy Body. When you drink of this cup, do it in remembrance of me."

As we prepare to partake together this sacred meal, we come into the presence of the Divine. As you do so,

Come observing silence. Come remembering those places where justice is sparse; Come remembering those who have no hope; Come remembering all those who risk their lives for the sake of God's justice.

These are holy things for holy people. Let us come into this holy space together!

## Prayer after Communion (In Unison)

**All: As one body, we lament with those who lament. We hope with those who Hope. We live with suffering. We live with beauty. Let us go from this table as a renewed community, doing the radical work of Jesus that calls us to live justice-making lives of faith. We are followers of God's Way. We give thanks!**

**Hymn**

***Bless'd be the Tie That Binds***

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## Benediction

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Love leads us to forgiveness. Love leads us to grace. Love leads us to mercy and compassion. Fill your hearts with love and know God's love is with you. Know that God's forgiveness, grace, and mercy, are given freely to you, for you are God's beloved child. Go forth and share this love, seeking forgiveness, and offering mercy. Amen.

## Postlude