

Worship at home

Current sermon series: Stewards of Souls

November 8, 2020

Call to worship: Psalm 96:1, 12

Prayers of praise, confession, supplication:¹

God of yesterday, today and forever,

You are the God of every generation, and your love endures forever.

You have protected us during difficult times, for your compassion is everlasting.

You have shown us the path to truth and life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this time of worship, we declare our love and loyalty to you,

and offer you our service in prayer, in praise, and in practice,

this day and every day,

our one true God, whom we know and love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In this solemn season of Remembrance, we are aware of how much war has cost the world you love. In spite of fighting between nations and neighbours, you have come to us in Jesus Christ, carrying no sword, calling us to serve as peace makers.

In this time of worship, renew in us the hope that you will turn our swords into ploughshares, and lead the world from the study of war to the promise of peace with justice for all your peoples.

God of mercy, we confess that the world around us is in a mess. Countries turn arguments over territory into threats of terror. Old enemies stir up conflict within their tribes and nations. The threat of violence keeps us all on edge. Forgive us for not learning from past conflicts what leads to peace with justice. Forgive us when we want to settle our own disagreements by keeping conflict alive.

In you, O LORD, we seek refuge,
do not let us be put to shame.

You are indeed our rock and our fortress;
for your name's sake lead us and guide us.

Into your hand we commit our spirit,
be gracious to us, O LORD.

Amen.

Assurance of pardon:

Christ died so that we might live. Through his undying love, we have been forgiven.

Rejoice in the forgiveness God offers us. Be at peace with God and yourself, and make peace with your neighbours, for Christ's sake. Amen.

¹ Adapted from worship resource for November 8, 2020 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

Hymn #410 “Joyful, joyful we adore you”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYKP2p6uEkM>

Stewardship of Souls: Kindness and Generosity

One of my objectives for this series of sermons is to invite us to reflect on how we can continue singing the Lord’s song when our church doors remain closed and the community has, for the moment, dispersed. We’ve spent a number of weeks already looking at the practice of giving thanks to the Lord in all circumstances. Now we’re reflecting on how taking responsibility for the stewardship of the souls our Master has entrusted to us – the body, mind, and spirit that makes up who we are – is another way we can continue singing the Lord’s song in this foreign landscape. In other words, our discipleship doesn’t come to an end just because we aren’t gathering for worship and fellowship in the church building. One of the lessons of the parable of the talents is that we each have the responsibility to care for the development of our bodies, minds, and spirits as disciples of Jesus regardless of circumstances.

We’ve looked at a few actions of discipleship which help us care for some core root beliefs by which the Holy Spirit can then develop the qualities that make for a healthy disciple of Jesus: love, peace, faith, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, self-control, and peace.

Today we’ll consider the root beliefs and activities of discipleship by which the Holy Spirit can develop within us qualities of *kindness* and *generosity* (or, in some translations, goodness.)

READ PSALM 31.

The quality:

Psalm 31 is a petition for help from God. The petitioner’s basis on which they make their plea are the embedded beliefs that God is real, that He is able to meet their needs, *and* that God is willing to do so.

If any of those statements were not true, God would not be worthy of our petitions. After all, you wouldn’t expect relevant help fixing your car from someone who

didn't know a spark plug from a tire iron! Nor would you expect tangible help from the most skillful mechanic who lived at the other end of the country!

But, believed the psalmist, “[the Lord has] taken heed of my adversities, ... he has set me in a broad place ... [the Lord] heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help...” God is real. God is able. And God desires to meet the real needs of his children.

This is the biblical understanding of kindness.

In Galatians 5:22, the apostle Paul listed kindness as one of the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit. The word he used was *chrestotes* which is a noun referring to something that is useful.

Kindness goes beyond being nice or friendly or simply not wanting any particular harm to befall someone. Kindness describes someone who is both able and willing to meet the real needs of real people.

I can remember one Friday evening in the middle of the winter. It was dark. It was snowing. I was on my way home from a job site pulling my camper trailer. I was tired. And I hit the brakes too hard. My truck and trailer slid off the road into the snow-filled ditch. I walked across the street to the only house on that stretch of road and knocked on the door. The man who lived there said that yes, he did have a tractor, and yes, he would try to help. He was able, he was willing, and with his help, I was on the road once more. He did me a kindness. *Chrestotes*.

Maybe it's a sign that God hasn't forgotten his creation.

Maybe it's a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work.

So many people in our communities who have the means to do so are willing to meet the real needs of others. Donating to food drives; supporting the Canadian Foodgrains Bank; volunteering to provide athletic programs for children; volunteering to make masks and PPEs; making casseroles at times of birth and death; caring for grandchildren and the children of neighbours. The list goes on. Kindness and the related quality, generosity, are not unknown in our midst!

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good;

his love endures forever!

Because it's a poem and a prayer rather than a history paper, we're not told the exact nature of the psalmist's current troubles. It seems that he has been cut off from

his community, shunned from his friends, and perhaps there are adversaries that are physically trying to capture him. Although we might not be experiencing the identical sorts of trouble, we can probably relate to his feelings of isolation at being without community! Or even the feeling of failing strength as our eyes lose their ability to see clearly and “bones waste away.” As the psalmist reflected, they took a step back, breathed, and in a moment of private worship remembered how God met their very real and immediate needs:

Blessed be the LORD,
 for he has wondrously shown
 his steadfast love to me
 when I was beset as a city under siege.
 I had said in my alarm,
 “I am driven far from your sight.”
 But you heard my supplications
 when I cried out to you for help.

Being mindful of these experiences, they came to belief that God is a God of kindness and they could face their current troubles in the security and of the shelter of the Lord’s presence.

The root beliefs:

Kindness and its cousin generosity are related to how we view the available resources in the world. We need food, shelter, and security.

If we believe that there is not enough to meet our needs (whether for food and shelter or protection), then we will live from a place of fear. And fear closes hands. With closed hands we pass by those who need help because we need to protect our own assets for the sake of our own survival. However, if we can operate out of the belief that our needs will be met, we can live from a perspective of abundance rather than scarcity. If we operate out of a worldview of abundance, then the fear lessens. Because *we* are assured of the shelter of the God of abundant kindness, our hearts and minds, and hands open to the needs of others.

This brings me to the conclusion that two of the root beliefs for which we need to care as we steward the souls entrusted to us are:

1. That our needs will be met:
 that God is real, able, and willing to meet our needs.

The actions of discipleship:

I'm not sure that there's any way to care for the belief that God is able and willing to meet our needs except through experience. Psalm 31 is not unique in its admission that the psalmist sought refuge in the Lord. We learn to trust God's kindness by availing ourselves of it for our food, our shelter, and our security.

Seeking refuge in the Lord's kindness involves all the actions of discipleship we've discussed thus far:

1. Regular Sabbath keeping and regular moments of private worship which nourish the root beliefs that God is love.
2. Daily choosing to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of this God whose crowning characteristic is love and in whom God reaches out for our well-being; in whom is an experience of life that exceeds the constraints and struggles of the present moment.
3. The cognitive, emotional, and physical task of accepting our human limits. Accepting the limits of others. And seeking divine help.

To which list we can add the action of discipleship of mindfulness. Seeking refuge in the Lord involves *trusting God to provide our needs and then being aware of the help God gives*. Giving thanks to the Lord for his help confirms the belief that God is real, able, and willing to help. As we become more aware of God's abundant goodness, our hearts and hands can open to meet the needs of others. As the hymn goes:

Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all,
healing pain and sickness, blessing children small...
Let me watch you, Jesus, till I'm gentle too,
till my hands are kind hands, quick to work for you.²

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn #631 "Jesus' hands were kind hands"

² "Jesus' hands were kind hands", #631 *Book of Praise*, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4B2WiRCKHs>

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:³

Almighty and loving God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
in every generation you have been present with your people:
in times of poverty and prosperity,
in times of sorrow and joy,
in times of health and pandemic,
in times of war and peace.

Today, we remember your gracious care in times of crisis,
and give thanks for the courage and sacrifice of the women, men and families
of the Canadian armed forces who have worked for peace, justice and protection in so
many different times and places.

Support those who have finished their time of service and still face challenges
in civilian life.

We thank you for the places where conflicts have ended, peace has been restored and
where citizens can enjoy secure freedoms and human rights.

Where people are oppressed and dissent restricted, encourage those who
witness and work for justice to be established.

We thank you for those called to serve others in their home communities, wherever they
call home. Especially we give thanks for those in our communities working hard in the
face of COVID-19.

May they know your protection and show your love in all they do.

We thank you for the many organizations in Canada working to bring hope to people
facing social exclusion, discrimination or exploitation.

Inspire leaders in our communities to provide access to the support they need
to thrive.

We thank you for the dedication of those who serve in the church. May your church
always be a place of hope, healing and welcome.

Guide our congregation and denomination through these challenging days so
that those who turn to us will find us faithful, loving, kind, and generous.

Eternal God, your promises endure from generation to generation. Knowing your
steadfast love, we trust you to answer our prayers according to your generous kindness
and infinite wisdom, offering ourselves in service with the words Jesus taught us to
pray:

The Lord's Prayer

³ Adapted from worship resource for November 8, 2020 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>