

Sermon September 8, 2024

A Story for the Child in All of Us Programs

Blessing of our Church School

Invitation

Will the children, students, the teachers and other church school leaders - please come forward.

Church is more than Sunday worship.... We work together, each in the way God has given to us, to build a stronger church - an ever more faithful people of God. Sunday school has an important place in our life together - it is the place where faith is nurtured.

Without our students we are poorer - without the teachers and leaders we are weaker - without you the parents and the rest of congregation we are less than God wants us to be. So today, we make a set of promises to one another before God - we enter into a covenant - to love and support each other, to grow and learn together, and to make God and faithfulness the center of our lives.

Students We thank God for our Church School,
 for the teachings of Jesus and
 the vision of Christ's Way.
 We will come to Church School as often as we can.
 We will do our best, so that we can learn about God
 and the ways God makes our world better.

**People We love our children. We love one another.
 We will encourage one another to live in the ways of
Christ, as we join with them in studying God's Word.
 We will try our best to grow with them in faith.
 And we will support the work of our church school
 with our time, our talent, our treasure and our
 prayers.**

Teachers We will walk with God and our students and the members of
 our congregation. We will work together with God's help. We

will do our best to learn, to live and to teach the ways of Christ.

Students will lay hands on the teachers:

Prayer of Dedication

All: Loving God, as we have promised before each other and before you, so let it be. Pour out your power and your grace upon us. Help us be your family and to seek together to live your way; to learn together to do your will; to work together to help one another; and to share with each other the joys and concerns you place upon our hearts. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Declaration

In the name of God – Creator, Christ and Spirit, I declare this covenant to have been made. May God bless us and keep us, both now and forevermore. Amen.

***Gloria** (*Children are Dismissed for Children's Church*)

Matthew 22:37-40

He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Rejoice in the Welcome

Water Rite

We bring the world before us.

(A large, empty bowl, a jug of water, and a small bowl of salt are placed at the center of the assembled group. Water is poured into the bowl from a jug.)

Let this water be a symbol both of our common baptism with all people of faith and the source of life shared with all people everywhere.

(Small bowl of salt is held up.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in our broken world.

(Some salt is poured into the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Ukraine and Russia.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Somalia.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Iraq.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Israel and Palestine, who are inextricably bound through violence.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Somalia.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Syria.

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in Hungary as today the Reformed Church embarks on a nationwide prayerchain and spiritual awakening

(A pinch of salt is added to the water.)

Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and the tears in the United States

(All salt is added to the water.)

(Let this salt be a symbol of the sorrow and tears for every place that faces conflict, terror or violence. – invite people to call out the names of the places)

(Bowl of water and salt is held up.)

But let us not forget that salt and water can also help cleanse and heal. Let us bless ourselves with this salt water as a sign of our commitment to healing divisions between people, through our prayers, words and actions.

Today we usher in a Season of Peace. In different ways, over the next several weeks, we will explore ways to become Peacemakers in a world that craves peace. This bowl holds our sorrow and tears... it also holds our prayers. And it reminds us our baptismal promises.

We are here because we are loved. We are here and called to love one another in new and radical ways. Look around and see who we are and whose we are – what better reason is there to rejoice.

From a prison cell, the Apostle Paul sent a letter to the Philippian church community. He didn't know if he would live or die there... he didn't know if he would ever worship again with this community that loved him so much. But he didn't shake his hand at God in anger like the early Israelites did in the wilderness... he didn't lose faith in the midst of suffering. No, Paul responds with thanksgiving and faith.

Hear these words from his letter:

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In that tiny prison cell, Paul's faith becomes stronger than ever and he learns an important lesson:

- Suffering and death in the name of Jesus Christ is better than life without him.

And he didn't mean that in a symbolic way. He suffered each day in that prison and he faced the real prospect of death there. Just as people of faith face the same things today in cells in places like Afghanistan and North Korea. Arrested for the crime of being a Christian. Their faith is so strong that they are willing to die for it. Just like Paul and the early disciples.

Most of us will not face the same hardship for our faith – at last I hope not. But we should still pray every day that each of us have faith to sustain us in the wilderness – whatever that wilderness may look like

And Paul learned something else too:

- No matter how difficult things are, no matter how alone he feels – he is never truly alone.

As Paul sits alone, he hears that there is a vast community of faith praying for him. All those little churches that he planted along the way – people in Philippi, Rome, Thessalonica, and Corinth were all lifting him up in prayer. And that prayer connected him back to those communities that he loved so much. And they connected him back to God.... The God he proclaimed as being nearer to us than our next breath

What better reason to rejoice than to know that God is near... nearer than we think

Today is Rejoice in the Welcome Sunday... a day when we rejoice in the love found in our God who travels with us every step of the way. And today we pray for all those people around the world who rejoice in God's loving presence, even when they are stranded in the wilderness. Today we join with communities of faith all around the world who lift up the poor and the powerless; the imprisoned and the oppressed. The news in recent weeks has been filled with stories of violence –war in faraway lands and gun fire in

schools; political campaigns that sow division and . And the countless people who quietly face their fears far away from cameras and reporters. Today is the perfect day to pray for peace, because we all need it so much!

- ♥ Today we pray for the nameless hostages held by Hamas. And we pray for the innocent civilians who die as bombs rain down on their tiny villages.... We pray that the villages that Jesus walked through 2000 years ago become places of true peace and justice are.
- ♥ We pray for the people of Sierra Leone, whose tentative steps towards peace have been thrown into disarray after a recent coup attempt.
- ♥ We pray for the 4 souls who lost their lives at the school shooting in Georgia... and for all the hundreds of thousands who have been impacted by gun violence that erupts in the ordinary places of our lives.
- ♥ We pray for the little girl who whispered in her teacher's ear that her family was living in a domestic violence shelter because "my father is so mean sometimes."
- ♥ We pray for the teen aged boy who attempted suicide because he was rejected by his family because he's gay.
- ♥ We pray for the names written on your hearts and we pray for the names written on my heart... and we pray for the names written on the hearts of everyone out there too.

We pray because Jesus Christ lived for us, suffered and died with words of radical forgiveness on his lips, and who gave us new life.

We pray because Jesus sent us the Spirit to speak for us and to lift us up when we find it difficult to rejoice. We pray and it reconnects us to the people who love us so much. We pray because it reconnects us back to God too.

What better reason is there to rejoice?

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid..." Jesus words to the disciples as he faced his own suffering and

death come to us today too. No matter how difficult life can be... no matter how vast the wilderness... the peace of Christ will sustain us through the Spirit. So rejoice... because God is nearer than we can imagine!

So, my friends, may you go in peace.

Sacrament of Communion

Great Thanksgiving

One: God be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts.

All: We lift them up to God.

One: Let us give thanks to our God.

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

One: It is a good and fruitful work to give thanks to you, Almighty God, in all places and at all times and in all our tasks. In our cars, our homes, our offices, our fields, and our kitchens; at our tables, our desks, our telephones, and computers; when we are resting or waiting, laboring or supervising, following or leading. All these we do with all your people now on earth and all the multitude of heaven, praising your name and joining in their unending hymn:

Holy, holy, holy ...

Holy are you and holy is your work among us in Jesus Christ, who came to be born in the home of a carpenter, a trade he learned and practiced, a laborer in our midst. He called out fishermen and activists. He healed the servant of a soldier. He received the support of resourceful women. He delegated his ministry to his disciples, empowered all his followers to do his divine work in this world. By his suffering, death, and resurrection, you gave birth to your church, delivered us from the bondage of sin and the power of death and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

The Story

One: On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." And so as a baptized and commissioned people, remembering your mighty work in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves, our daily lives, and our unique locations for ministry in the world- homes and hospitals, parks and stores, prisons and concert halls- as a living and holy sacrifice in union with Christ's offering for us as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

All: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

The 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.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

Forever and ever. Amen.

The Meal

Benediction

May the blessing of the God of peace and justice be with us; May the blessing of the One who weeps the tears of the world's suffering be with us; And may the blessing of the Spirit who inspires us to reconciliation & hope be with us; from now into eternity. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.