**Worship Service – July 26, 2020**

**Liturgy including Sermon Manuscript**

 **Call to Worship** *based on Psalm 105:1-11, 45b*

[adapted from [http://www.thetimelesspsalms.net/w\_resources/pentecost8[17]a\_2017.htm](http://www.thetimelesspsalms.net/w_resources/pentecost8%5B17%5Da_2017.htm)]

One: God of the ancestors of our faith, God of the humble amongst us today:

**ALL: God whose Name and Being is ‘Steadfast Love’ - we gather to worship you.**

One: God of the widow and the parentless; God of the immigrant and stranger:

**ALL: God whose Name and Being is ‘Unconditional Tenderness’ – we give you**

**praise.**

One: God of all people, past, present and future; God of our homeland and the faraway

places:

**ALL: God whose Name and Being is ‘Justice’, ‘Equity’ and ‘Mercy’ – we gather**

**to sing songs of thankfulness; and to pray our prayers for forgiveness and**

**your blessing.**

One: “Give thanks to the LORD and proclaim his greatness. Let the whole world

know...”

**ALL: The you are good!**

**Opening Prayer** *based on Romans 8, Psalm 105*

Our gracious and ever-loving God,

we come in the midst of summer

looking for refreshment.

We rest in the knowledge

of the wonderful works you have done for us,

and of the deep and abiding love you have for us

and for all God’s people.

Search our hearts.

Fill our soul with your indwelling Spirit

who whispers to our soul

that all will be well if we but trust in you.

Shine your light before us,

that we may see our path to you

and to your kingdom on earth. **Amen.**

**Scripture: Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)**

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

One: May we hear the still speaking God in these words.

**ALL: God is still speaking**

**Sermon**

The lectionary passage today comes from one of the most theologically dense parts of the New Testament. This is from a letter written by Paul – quite late in his career – to the Christian community in Rome, Italy. We know from the book of Acts (18:1-2) that the church of Rome had existed for some time. And that is was made up of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. Paul had yet to visit this metropolis of the ancient world but longed to meet both Gentile and Jewish believers there.

It had been a tough few years in Rome, particularly for the Jews. Emperor Claudius, at one point in the mid-1st-century expelled Jews from the city accusing them of agitations and disturbances. It wasn’t until about 5 years later that all Jews, including Jesus-following Jews were allowed back. And when they returned, they found a Christian church that had become very non-Jewish in custom and practice. This created a lot of tension, so that by Paul’s day the Roman church was effectively divided: people disagreed about how to follow Jesus, they were debating about whether non-Jewish Christians should celebrate the Sabbath, eat Kosher or be circumcised.

So, Paul wrote this letter to accomplish a few things: He wanted this divided church to become unified – and for a practical purpose. He was hoping that the Roman church could become a staging ground for his mission to go even further west, all the way to Spain. These rough and divisive circumstances are part of what motivated Paul to write out his fullest explanation of the gospel: The Good News about God’s righteousness, revealed in Jesus who demonstrated through his life, death and resurrection a new way of being human – by being in relationship with our Creator and with a beloved community.

But, division, distrust, blame and hopelessness…are experiences that we know all too well these days. And, what I believe God is determined to communicate to use this morning, is that despite the political and cultural rhetoric of the day, God’s presence with us STILL has a unifying strength. It is my prayer that you will trust a-new THIS truth – that the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe – desires to work *with* you! desires to lament *with* you! to cry out in sorrow *with* you! to yell in frustration *with* you! I’ve got two points for us to focus in on this morning: the first is that the Spirit of God will work *with* you, even while you are weak. The second, God will work *with* you, while you are suffering. Both these statements are made true by the overarching TRUTH that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

First**:** The Spirit of God will work *with* you, even while you are weak.

As I watch and listen to the news these days – I find myself contemplating on the part that I play in systems that discriminate others on the bases of the color of their skin, as I participate in efforts to brings awareness to environmental derogation, as I think about what it might mean to start a family during a global pandemic that has been mismanaged by those in power, as I worry about my final year in seminary being conducted online, knowing that my situation is hundreds of times less demanding than my wife’s who is facing the prospect of returning to school as a teacher, whose administration has put minimal strategies in place to protect her health– I am made very aware of my limits, my weaknesses, my unhealthy coping mechanisms, my tendency to get angry and misdirect that frustration inward or more likely towards those I love, that I’ve been quarantining with.

And, yet I sat down to read through the passage for this week and the opening words were a balm to my soul. Romans 8:26, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (v26-30, NRSV) I latched onto “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” …but quickly, I started reading the passage directly before to see what the “Likewise” actually referred to.

Paul, beginning in verse 18 of this same chapter reflects on the sufferings of his day. You know the verses well but let me read them in *The Message* paraphrase to help us get up to speed. Actually, starting at verse 15: *“This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: [Parent] and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we’re certainly going to go through the good times with him! That’s why I don’t think there’s any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don’t see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.”*

“Likewise” …that is, while we are expectant of a new future, while we are waiting on things to be different…yearning for the Kingdom of God to come in its fullness right-ing all the wrongs and unleashing the floods of justice: “God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us…” and if we don’t know how to maintain that connection with God, and “we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter,” do not worry or lose heart, because “[God’s Spirit] does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.” [God’s Spirit] …keeps us present before God.” (v26-27, MSG)

Paul is advocating for a complete reliance on the Spirit of God in hard times. Perhaps because it is precisely during these hard times that make us HYPER-AWARE of our weaknesses, our failings, our deficients. We mourn the fact that our needs and wants cannot be met. We fall into default modes of being and we lose are cool, become distressed, deeply sad and scared. This is are human condition, and yet the Spirit of God will work *with* you, in our weakness. The Greek word that is translated “helps” here, is one that I can’t pronounce, but has a more nuanced and dense meaning that our English communicates. It’s range of meanings include: “to lay hold along with, to strive to obtain with others, aid in obtaining, to take hold with another.” What is clear is that the Spirit of God isn’t pushing us to the side to grab hold of the steering wheel when we’re ploughing ourselves into a pit of despair. Rather, the Spirit of God – who resides in us, and humanity, and in the world – works in tandem with us, so that our weakness it not what determines the outcome. The Spirit of God is well aware of the limitations of humanity, and yet grabs hold of us, reminding us that we are in experiencing the pain that comes before the birth of something new.

Meanwhile, we pray. We connect with the will of God, whether with tears, wordless groans, with our actions…we rely fully on the Spirit of God to keep us present with God, translating the language of our frustration, so that we remember that what we see and experience right now, isn’t the final word on the matter.

Second: God will work *with* you, while you are suffering.

Verses 31 opens with as series rhetorical questions, designed to challenge our state of minds and hearts, while divisiveness and distrust swirl around us. Paul challenges the members of the church in Rome: “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” Again, in verse 35: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” *The Message* says it like this: “Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.” This is good news at a time when good news is hard to come by.

In our final verses of the day, verses 38 and 39…we read the foundation of Paul’s hope even as the world and the church seems totally out of control. He lists ten potential adversaries in four pairs and two separate ones and states clearly that he 100% convinced that whatever the cause of our suffering - it will not prevail, it will not derail the Kingdom of God, it will not destroy the very thing that we have been yearning for. For God is still at work *with* us, and within us while we are suffering. Paul begins: “For I am convinced that:

* *Neither* death, nor life: Death can be fearsome in its inevitability and finality, but life can be fearsome too—painful—grinding. But Christ gives us hope of life abundant — a life lived in the presence and love of God.
* *nor* angels, nor rulers: Powerful entities above and on the earth. Consider the host of tyrants who have reigned in the past century and the millions of people—often their own citizens—who have suffered at their hands. Paul assures us that, while rulers might separate us from the chance of a flourishing life in this world, they cannot separate us from the love of God and the new life that our Creator offers.
* *Nor* things present, nor things to come: We might be surprised not to see ‘things past’ on this list, because people are often gripped by events of the past (whether good or bad) and saddled by guilt from past wrongs. But Paul focuses instead on ‘things present’ and ‘things to come’—the challenges that we face in the present and the trials that we fear in the future. In our current day, we need to retell ourselves that our present circumstances, even the stresses of the future are not enough to disconnect us for the goodness, the strength, and the comfort found in God.
* Nor powers: These could be spiritual or earthly powers.
* Nor height, nor depth: This could be a reference to the heights of space and the depths of oceans, meaning that we have nothing ultimate to fear from comets above or tectonic forces below. Or it could refer to the heights and depths of our emotions, meaning that neither our great joys nor our great sorrows can separate us from God.
* Nor anything else in all creation: If Paul were to try to be comprehensive regarding everything that we might fear, the list would go on forever—so he ends the list with this catch-all phrase that assures us that nothing—absolutely nothing— “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And this is the bedrock of the promise of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. During a season that has heightened our sense of personal and societal weakness, that has seen and continues to see massive suffering globally and in our own nation, I ask: How can we reclaim and proclaim the good news that: The Spirit of God will work *with* you, even while you are weak and that God will work *with* you, while you are suffering. The answer is found in the vastness and sureness of God’s love. Love that can provide the ultimate security, ultimate human fulfillment. Love that we are charged with incarnating her and now.

The themes of love and unity in this letter – written during a turbulent time of division and distrust – are the very antidote needed during our own divisive time. How will you receive God’s love this week? How might you be a channel, a conduit of God’s love? People who find themselves love by God care passionately about justice, about the flourishing of others, about fairness, mercy and forgiveness. People who know themselves to be in the presence of a God, who knows their weaknesses and their sufferings, can find reason to hope even when things feel entirely beyond hope. The love of God challenges us to trust fully in a power higher than ourselves. I pray that this week, you will hear this word of joy and justice. God loves you and works *with* you and *within*, even in our weaknesses and suffering. God loves you, and nothing can change that, in this day of any other.

**Benediction**

One: With a song of praise on our lips,

**ALL: we go forth with God.**

One: With the love of God in our hearts,

**ALL: we go forth with God.**

One: With a commitment to usher in God’s kingdom,

**ALL: we go forth with God.**

One: With all that we are and all we can be,

**ALL: we go forth with God.**