

Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
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Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. The full warmth of summertime is now upon us. It is the season of growth, and our fields and our gardens are beginning to bear fruit.

As we begin our worship today, let's listen in our minds' ears to the prayer hymn of thankfulness to God, "For the Beauty of the Earth," written by Folliott S. Peirpont in the 19th Century, and usually sung to a tune by 19th Century composer Conrad Kocher:

***For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.***

***For the wonder of each hour of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale and tree and flower, sun and moon and stars of light,
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.***

***For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth and friends above; for all gentle thoughts and mld,
Lord of all to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.***

*For the church that evermore lifteth holy hands above,
Offering up on every shore here pure sacrifice of love,
Lord of all to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.*

*For thyself, best gift divine, to our race so freely given;
For that great, great love of thine, peace on earth and joy in heaven,
Lord of all to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.*

Our Psalm for today is a song of praise to God for God's forgiveness, deliverance, and power over all the universe. We read from Psalm 65:

*Praise is due to you, O God in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.
Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.
By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation;
You are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.
By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.
You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the
peoples.
Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the
gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.
You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly, setting its ridges, softening it with showers, and
blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,
The meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.*

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures for today is from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 1-5. This passage invites us to consider how we will invest our lives and what value we will receive for the way our lives are spent:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not

satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; listen, so that you might live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

The theme of choosing is continued in our Epistle reading today, from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 1-6. Just a word of interpretation here: the word "flesh" as it is translated into English does not quite accurately represent the Greek meaning of the word. There is another word in Greek for "body." That is not what is meant here. The meaning of "flesh" in this passage is more like "self-centeredness," which is understood to be opposed to spirituality.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the things of the Spirit is life and peace.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon delivered by the Pastor, you may do so by going to the church website or opening the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

One of the things that has clearly been affected by the CoVid-19 epidemic is our consumer behavior – the ways we shop and the things we decide to purchase. There are numerous examples. Anyone who went to a grocery store last March experienced the empty shelves where cleaning products, toilet paper, antibiotic wipes, hand sanitizers and isopropyl alcohol used to be. There was also a sudden rush on canned fruits and vegetables, flour, bottled water and other staples that someone might want to have on hand in case we were all quarantined in our homes for a long time. In other

words, for some time at least, our consumer behavior was primarily driven by the instinct for survival. It is less so now. We've discovered that we can cope with the inconveniences of social distancing without turning our homes into survivalist camps.

Some other things have happened to us though, as a result of this socially transmitted disease: while some aspects of the economy have been frozen in place, some forms of commerce have thrived – Amazon is one of the best examples, but there are others as well. Even before the coronavirus disrupted our lives, we had already started down the path of engaging in less in-person shopping. Many malls had been declining, and those that remained seemed to offer less selection all the time. But now, the stores where we found a more limited selection of unimaginatively designed products each year, finally seem to be on the ropes, and some are closing. Meanwhile, in the community where I live, there are packages being left at the door of many households almost every day of the week. Those of us who enjoyed a night at the movies or socializing over drinks or dinner at a local restaurant find ourselves adding streaming channels on our home networks and picking up carry-out at curbside for our evening meal.

With all of this, there is a subtle change in values. It creeps up on us and changes who we are, and sometimes we don't even notice it. The enjoyment we used to derive from a friendly chat with a salesperson, a customer service representative, or the server in a restaurant have been traded for a few clicks on our home computer or cell phone. We miss our friends at church with whom we have shared many of life's most precious moments, but if you search around a little, you can find a simulated worship experience that's professionally and artistically produced, and you can even choose the message you want God to give you this week. I do it myself!

The choices we get on the internet can be very appealing. But the convenience that we get in return for losing personal contact can become addictive too: we order a little more entertainment or gadgetry on line than we actually need, because the pictures look attractive and one-click ordering with

one-day delivery provides immediate gratification. You want to know how I feel about that? I love it! I like to waste time exploring the thousands of images of time-saving devices and all their promises to me about being able to do things I'll never really get around to doing. I could easily go shopping on Amazon for a couple hours every day. But I want to stop myself, because I have a suspicion that, when I get obsessive about these things I may be making up for something else that I'm missing, and maybe that something else is more important.

There are many contributing causes for obsessive or addictive behavior, but I think what often (or possibly always) underlies it is the feeling of losing our way on the journey to find meaning or purpose in what we are doing. We can find a substitute for meaningful activity in some obsessive quest for greater security, or longer life, or acquisition of belongings or wealth. Even on-line buying or binge-watching a TV series will serve for a time. Any of these activities can have its place. We all need our diversions. But in the end, addictions and obsessions are symptoms that the tools of convenience that we employ are becoming ways we use to replace something that we really need. And they are costly – not only in the financial sense, but in the human cost – the cost to our souls and to our capacity to give life to our world.

In the prophet Isaiah's voice, there must have been such exasperation, when he asked his hearers, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

The Apostle Paul had advice to give too about the misuse of resources to obtain what doesn't meet our needs, but the advice needs a little translating to understand it. Paul says, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Here's an odd thing though: when we read this statement today, it sounds to us like Paul thinks anything that is pleasing to the body is evil, as opposed to the spirit, which is heavenly and good. Spend your life meditating and praying and don't give in to your physical wants and you have it. Except that's not what the words mean in Greek. Without getting too complicated, the word Paul used that we translate

“flesh” is the Greek word “sarx” from which we derive the English word “sarcophagus,” (a place we put dead things). The simplest English word for what he is talking about is “selfishness.” Some sins of the flesh, or selfishness, are bodily sins, but many are not. What Paul means when he talks about “setting our minds on the flesh” is that we choose to spend our resources for selfish satisfaction at the expense of others instead of generous sharing for the benefit of the common good. Paul says that kind of selfish consumption leads to death. Likewise, setting our mind on the Spirit means spending and using all that we have on whatever brings peace and fulfillment to our home in this world. See, spirituality isn’t mostly about praying and thinking about heaven at all! It’s mostly about caring about other people and the world we live in. Paul says using what we have to contribute to a just and caring environment around us can bring us the satisfaction that we’re looking for, and that our self-centered efforts at accumulation can never give us.

Because we live today in a very materialistic society, it is tempting for us to connect happiness with comfort and comfort with possessions. For some, accumulation is a way of life, well beyond even the level of luxurious living. That isn’t so for most of us, of course; but the adulation and power conferred upon the extremely wealthy through media attention, political favors and economic benefits become symbolic of the rewards of a successful life, to which too many people are led to aspire.

The darker side of this materialistic outlook is that, with all of the wealth that has been produced in the corporate global society, we have somehow neglected to provide a humane standard of living for millions of our planet’s occupants. Worse than that, even in our own country, we have not been able to form an economic system that provides a living wage to the families of minimum wage workers who work full time in the laboring and service sectors of our society. Conservatives and liberals, socialists and capitalists, all have their arguments about why this is so and whether it can be fixed and how to fix it. Maybe one of them is right. I certainly don’t know. I’m neither a politician nor an economist. If I were, I’d be feeling ashamed, because

to the average citizen it feels like we've tried all that; and sometimes things have improved, but on the whole, in the quest for universal freedom from want, none of our plans so far has worked – at least if we assume that everybody has been working toward the same humanitarian goal. So what's been missing? Do you suppose it's possible that all along the problem has been spiritual?

To think of the world's economic and social inequities as a spiritual concern, of course, places a special burden on those of us who are religious. If the economists and politicians should feel ashamed, woe be to us! Have we spent these millennia searching Scriptures in many tongues and praying and advocating for what seemed to be the right will of God only to arrive at this point in human history with all the incredible knowledge we have achieved and still not figured out how to love all our neighbors in practice as well as theory? But surely it is not in the human heart that the injustices of the world are born!

The world is not just a place of darkness. All around us are signs of goodness and light. Compassion blooms in unlikely places, and here and there we see welcome signs of human compassion. In times of floods and earthquakes and storms, we see neighbors helping neighbors. We hear about the ravages of war in some part of the globe, and people rush to provide food and shelter and transport people out of danger. Only I wonder sometimes if that concern for others in times of crisis might be broadened into a more constant way of life we share with one another – if we religious folk could stand united in the spirituality of our traditions, and set our minds on advocacy and practices that affirm the global community where everyone belongs and everybody matters. If we're not teaching it, who will be?

Our Time of Prayer

As we move into our time of prayer, let us remember that we, though separated, are in worship and in fellowship together today. May the Spirit of Christ be felt among us, and may we know the comforting presence of God in this time of prayer.

We remember before God our friends in this congregation, especially those who are isolated from others as we await together the diminishment of this virus that has kept us apart.

We hold up before God all those who serve in hospitals and nursing homes, those who serve as emergency technicians, as chaplains, and as service providers of many kinds. We pray for their health and for their strength as they work to keep all of us safe.

We pray today for our nation, our state, our city and our county, as the various levels of government make decisions in difficult times.

We give thanks for friends who bring us comfort, and we give thanks for every opportunity we are given to offer support and encouragement to others.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**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
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.