

**Sunday Worship**  
**A Service for Your Use at Home**  
**St Paul United Church of Christ**  
**5312 Old Blue Rock Road**  
**Cincinnati, Ohio 45247**  
**Allen M Fluent, Pastor**

**August 2, 2020**

*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 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship, as we continue to explore the meaning of the parables of Jesus that are recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Today we have two parables about how it is that there appear to be both good and bad people in the world, and God seems to leave them all here to contend with one another.**

As we begin our worship today, read the words and hum the tune, if you remember it, to a hymn by Marty Haugen that celebrates our gathering in faith, wherever we are:

***Here in this place, the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt are vanished away.  
See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.***

***Gather us in, the lost and forsaken, gather us in; our spirits inflame.***

***Call to us now, and we shall awaken; we shall arise at the sound of our name.***

***We are the young, our lives are a mystery; we are the old, who yearn for your face.  
We have been sung throughout all of history, called to be light to the whole human race.***

*Gather us in, the rich and the haughty; gather us in, the proud and the strong;  
Give us a heart so meek and so lowly; give us the courage to enter the song.*

*Here we receive new life in the waters; here we receive the bread of new birth;  
Here you shall call your sons and your daughters, call us anew to be salt for the earth.  
Give us to drink the wine of compassion; give us to eat the bread that is you;  
Nourish us well, and teach us to fashion lives that are holy and hearts that are true.*

*Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven light years away,  
Here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.  
Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;  
Gather us in, all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.*

Our Psalm for today is Psalm 145, verses 8-9, 14-18:

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The Lord is good to all, and God's compassion is over all that God has made.  
You are faithful, God, in all your words and gracious in all your deeds.  
You uphold all who are falling and raise up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.  
You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.  
You are just in all your ways, and kind in all your doings.  
You are near to all who call on you, to all who call on you in truth.

Our Gospel lesson today is two parables of Jesus from Matthew 13. The first parable is in verses 24-30, and the second in verses 47-50.

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barns.*

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

*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.)*

**Does it seem to you, as I confess it does to me, that from the beginning of religion there have always been those who have wanted to prove their righteousness or piety by casting others out, punishing the devil out of them, or committing them to eternal damnation in the hands of an angry god? History has been unkind to judgmental people, though. It seems like the further along we go, the likelier it is that these religious judges become remembered as the wrongheaded bigots of our history, while many of those they chose to cast out emerge as courageous defenders of truth. It seems to me too bad that it takes so long for this realization to take place within the church, giving cover for contemporary judgmental Christians to pass as innocent defenders of the faith.**

**A brief paging through history might give us pause, as we consider what behaviors to praise and condemn in our own time: just remember the crusades of the middle ages and the blight they left upon Jewish-Moslem-Christian relations for centuries afterward, the efforts of the Inquisition to torture the demons out of those who dissented from church doctrine, the suppression of science from the middle ages through the age of Darwin, the condemnation of "witches" in colonial American Protestantism, the portrayal of racial minorities and persons of differing sexual identities as disposed toward sinfulness, and the belief held by many for a long time that women were the source and enticement to sin.**

**We are tempted to feel proud that we no longer hold such beliefs about others and that we no longer engage in the draconian punishments that**

people practiced when they believed they were absolutely right; but in every age it is only hindsight that tells us how wrong we used to be. As the lyrics of an old hymn have it, "Time makes ancient good uncouth." But perhaps the truly wise people among us will come to recognize and confess that, even in this present moment, people just don't have very strong gifts for discerning what's right and what's wrong while it's still going on. So it's good that we argue about important matters of faith and ethics while also being careful about whom we decide to condemn. Better yet, to leave the judgment up to God, as Jesus and Matthew both affirm.

I have always loved the Gospel According to St Matthew. It is the Gospel that contains the wonderful sayings of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus reminds us of the blessings that come from God, by listing the beatitudes, then goes on to describe a particular kind of nonviolent resistance of evil, in the phrase to "turn the other cheek." In this gospel are also beautiful words about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field that demonstrate to us how God will care for us. But there is also one thing I confess to not liking in Matthew's Gospel: it is the phrase used frequently by him when he is speaking about those who reject the Word of God. He says they will be cast into the outer darkness or the furnace of fire where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." To make things worse, Matthew tends to put these words on the lips of Jesus, as is done in the parables we are reading today. But I don't think Jesus said these words when he was originally telling his stories. The reason I don't think Jesus said them is that in the other Gospels in the Bible, there is no indication that Jesus ever ended his stories with such words of judgment. Moreover, the idea that God sends people to eternal hell fire doesn't seem to fit with anything else Jesus said or seemed to believe about God. So I think it's Matthew, not Jesus, who held that belief about the future of evildoers.

But now that I've said that, I also want to give Matthew his due. Though I may question the way he did it, I think he correctly perceived a problem in the church, and he was trying to fix it. I think he saw clearly that there are some people, no matter how kind they may be in many ways, who just

**can't help themselves from wanting bad people to suffer for what they've done, and knowing that, he decided to share these two parables Jesus had spoken, first to make the point that there are indeed people among us who behave badly, and second to tell us we don't have to judge, condemn and punish such people, because that's God's job, not ours. It's just when Matthew takes it one step further than Jesus' parables did and declares that they will be miserably tortured by God that I think he goes a little too far, and I don't think Jesus would agree with him.**

**But let's take what is good in this lesson from Matthew along with all that is good that we know about Jesus, because the bottom line is very important: there are things worth arguing about in this world, and whenever we have the opportunity to defend the interests of those who are poor or oppressed or lonely or in pain, we should do it; and whenever there is reason to criticize one another or the government or the economic system or the church for things we think they do wrong, we ought to go ahead and raise our voice. But both history and Scripture have a clear lesson for us when we engage in such things: we don't need to engage in final judgment; God is able to handle that without our help, and those who try to do God's work are usually found wanting in the end.**

### **Sacrament of Holy Communion**

(It has been our practice during these weeks of physically separated worship to celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of each month. You may join in our celebration by using whatever drink and food you have in your home to share in our sacred meal. If you use this service in printed form, just read the words and take the elements, knowing that we are sharing the meal with you. Those watching the recorded video may share as the words are spoken.)

**The Holy Communion is the very center of Christian faith and practice, because it reminds us that we belong to one another and to God in the family meal of faith. We remember that on the same night when Jesus was betrayed he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, and said, "This is my body**

**which is given for you. Take and eat. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you for the remission of your sins. Drink of it all of you. Do this in remembrance of me.”**

**We pray, God, that this food and drink may be to us the body and blood of Jesus Christ, that we, as we partake of it, may know that we take Christ into ourselves and share Christ with one another. For this grace, we give you thanks, and we rejoice with all those gathered around the spiritual table of your presence, wherever we are this day. Today, we pray for one another, especially mindful of those among us who have physical ills, those who are separated from family and friends, and those who are required to work in places of risk. We pray for the people of our nation, especially those living in cities that are responding to unrest and challenged by issues of justice for all. We pray for people throughout the world who suffer the effects of poverty, food shortages, weather calamities, and forced migration. And we pray for our own will to follow the teachings of Jesus, to help where we are able and to seek the Realm of justice and peace.**

**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.**

**(Now take the food)**

**This is the body of Christ. Take and eat.**

**(And take the cup)**

**This is the blood of Christ. Take and drink.**

**May the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ our Savior be and abide with us now and forever more. 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.**