

Home Service for April 28, 2024

Welcome and Announcements

You may also find listening to some of your favorite hymns helpful in worship.

Connected to Christ through the power of love, we become the presence of God for the world.

Call to Worship:

As members of Christ's tree of life, we are connected, in love, to God.

As members of Christ's tree of life, we are connected, in love, to one another.

As members of Christ's tree of life, we strengthen our connection through worship.

Opening Prayer:

Loving God, send your Spirit among us now. Bind us to you in love this day, that we may worship in unity and friendship. Bind us to you in love this hour, that we may be strengthened to bring abundant love to your world. In love and gratitude, we pray. Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

Speak truth to our hearts, O God. Speak love to our lives, that we may remain in your love and share your love joyously with others. Speak grace to our souls, that we may rest in your grace and forgive others as we have been forgiven. Speak mercy to our world, that all the world may know your love and find redemption in your grace. In hope and trust, we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance:

God's promises are sure. The promises of forgiveness, grace, and love are true. In Christ's love and grace, we are forgiven and made new.

Read Psalm 22:25-31

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;

before those who fear you^[a] I will fulfill my vows.

²⁶ The poor will eat and be satisfied;

those who seek the LORD will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth

will remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations

will bow down before him,

²⁸ for dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.

³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!

Prayers of the People:

Almighty God, whose love is beyond understanding, whose mercy is beyond comprehension—we lift up our hearts to you in prayer. Though we were captives of our sinful and rebellious ways, your love has released us. You have freed us to experience divine love in our own lives. Your atoning love has freed us from the penalty of sin, which was rightfully ours to pay. How can we express our thanksgiving, except to praise your name and to allow your love to be seen in us. Grant to us a determined faith and a fervent love, that we might be reflections of your divine grace. Hear our prayers, O Lord, as we offer our petitions, for those who we have named aloud and those who we have named in our hearts, in the name of the One who is love, Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is The kingdom, and the power and the glory forever and ever. AMEN

Read the Lesson: Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”^[b]

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ^[37] ^[c] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Read the Epistle Lesson: 1 John 4:7-21

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love

one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Read the Gospel Lesson: John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Message

In our world today, we have a lot of misunderstanding about what genuine unconditional love is as so many try to find love apart from God. Without God’s love we are incomplete! The Gospel lesson helps us understand that apart from Jesus Christ we can do nothing. Jesus tells us that He is the Vine, God our Heavenly Father is the Vine grower and that we are the branches. Tying the Gospel to today’s Epistle we can draw the conclusion that if we are detached from the

lifegiving vine that we are incomplete, insecure, dissatisfied and spiritually starving.

Webster's dictionary, defines love as a strong liking for someone or something, or a passionate affection for another person. Notice that Webster's definition of love involves objects of the world, using the word "person" or "something." The definition seems a little incomplete. It falls short of how I would attempt to describe my love for my grandchildren and my children. A strong liking, but I guess any human definition will fall short of what God's Love is. As a human I know that there are a lot of things that I cannot describe properly. Things like a fantastic sunset or the color of the fall leaves, perhaps the colors in the spring flowers. I just don't have the vocabulary and if I did, I am still not sure that we have the words that are descriptive or vivid enough.

We need to remember that love is from God, therefore a human definition will never be good enough. God is the only completely accurate source for a definition and that is primarily by or observation of his actions. The love that God demonstrates and defines is even harder to grasp, that is why we call it unconditional love. Unconditional love is the goal that we are to try to achieve as Christians and ultimately as a church. And that is the love we can obtain only by remaining in Christ.

Eight times in today's Gospel, Jesus says: "remain in me". It may sound strange that Jesus would need to encourage his disciples to remain in him. It sounds strange to us that we need to be reminded to remain in Christ. But just think how everything has changed since the Lord God Almighty created the world. Creation was perfect. God created man in his own image. Man sinned. Everything changed once sin entered this world. We are told at the birth of Seth (the son of Adam and Eve) about another great change. Seth was born in the image of man, not the image of God. This image of man, our sinful nature from birth does not seek God. It is very fitting to be reminded that we are to remain in Christ. We must remain in Christ who is the true vine. For only in Christ will we find strength. Only in Christ will we produce results.

Jesus is our true vine. Sounds simple yet we often turn to our own ways. We act as if we know better than God himself. We reason out and justify many things that are not very godly. Our sinful nature is a strong distraction hindering us from carrying out and doing the will of our Father. On our own and by our own reason and thinking we really are able to do nothing God-pleasing at all. In fact, we will fail.

Why don't we always remain in Christ, the true vine? Our sinful nature leads us away. The world around also entices us to move away from God rather than closer to him. Since that first sin we are not able to clearly see God's perfect will for our lives. We struggle to know God's will for our lives. At times we quickly do what our flesh wants to do rather than follow God's will.

The Lord's words should ring in our ears, "remain in me". Yes, we need to hear those encouraging words time and time again. Today's Gospel reminds us that we are branches grafted onto the true vine, Jesus Christ. Just like branches of apple trees and of grape vines we do not produce anything at all on our own. Instead, we are fed, nourished, and strengthened by God. May we praise and thank God for the strength He freely, daily, and richly supplies. As believers who are branches, we receive strength from Christ, the true vine. Attached to Christ, the true vine this strength of faith will also produce results.

We as the branches not only remain in Christ but also produce results. We are the branches and Christ is the vine. Christ wants us to have all that we need. He is able to provide all that we need. The vine does everything for us. As branches we produce results because of and from the strength we have received from the vine. Christ, our vine, encourages us to ask for even more. COLOSSIANS 1:10 states: "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God". Notice in this prayer there is nothing earthly. This is not a prayer for health, wealth, or glory. Notice the four requests: grow in God's knowledge, live a godly, worthy life, please God in every way, and bear fruit in every good work!

The results of fruitful branches are needed in our world more than ever. As branches grafted to the vine, we are able and blessed to produce results. Those results are: "Goodness, righteousness and truth" which are very rare commodities in today's world. In today's political arena these fruits seem totally absent. The world wants us to watch out for number one, ourselves. By grace the words of the Lord has been planted in our hearts. As faithful sowers may we scattered the seed, but it also takes effort for the seed to bear abundant fruit. Perseverance produces a crop. We need to always hear God's word, read God's word, and learn God's word in order for us to preserve.

Our perfect and complete understanding of God's will in our lives is clouded by sin. Everything truly did change when perfection was destroyed by man's pride and selfishness. No wonder in these few verses the Lord says over and over:

“remain in me”. Christ is the true vine and we are the branches. On our own we are nothing but in Christ we find strength always and eternally. Only in Christ does the branch produce any results. The fruitfulness of the believing branch is not selfish. The fruitfulness of the branch comes from the strength of the vine. The fruitfulness of branches will reflect back to that vine. May others always see the strength of Christ in each of us and then praise our Father in heaven! So remain in Christ each and every day, for in Christ we are strengthened. In Christ we produce results. Amen.

Let us pray: Nourishing God, wellspring of life, you give us everything we need to sustain our lives. But, we cannot live as you desire unless you give us even more, the power of your redeeming grace. Graft us into Christ, that into our barren existence, the surging power of your Holy Spirit might nourish us spiritually. Make us into green, growing, and loving branches, that your love might flow from us to those we meet in our daily life. This we ask in the name of Christ, the vine. Amen.

Benediction:

Branches of the Vine, go from this place blessed by Love to work in love with your family, your friends, your neighbors, and strangers who will become friends, bearing the fruit of the life-giving Vine as you cultivate abundant life wherever you go. Amen.