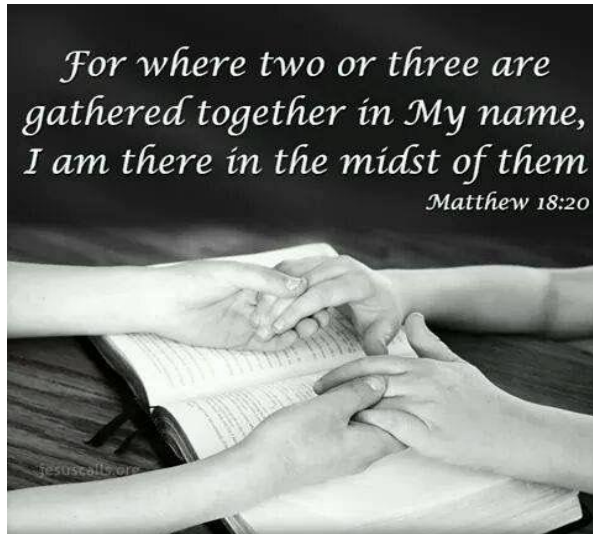


SEPTEMBER 10, 2023
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST
"ACCOUNTABILITY"



St. John United church of Christ
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Rev. Rosemary Captain, Pastor and Teacher
Organist – Sharon Banjavcic
Liturgy – Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay
Communion Liturgy – Rev. Thom Shuman

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: When two or three gather,
Christ lives in every moment,

MANY: Where two or three gather,
Christ is present with them.

ONE: Where two or three gather to worship God,

MANY: Glad songs of praise are lifted,
hearts are filled with hope.

ONE: When two or three gather to serve God's
creation,

Many: Christ is feeding the hungry,
Christ is building shelters of peace.

ONE: Let us worship and give thanks for the One
who teaches us to do the same.

***INVOCATION:**

God who journeys with us, we give thanks to be
gathered in your presence. May we acknowledge
you in the brightness of the day and in the
stillness of the night. Provide us a vision of your
reign on earth and in our lives. Make us your
witnesses to a world in need of hope and peace.
Infuse us with your love, and may this time
gathered as your people transform us to reflect
your goodness in the world. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:** Our ancestors in the faith
sometimes sought vengeance on their on their
enemies. Jesus challenged his friends to listen
and reconcile those with whom they disagreed.

Paul counseled followers to put away quarreling, jealousy, and harmful behavior. There is much in our lives that is harmful to ourselves and others, much that leads to brokenness and lasting pain. Let us confess our need for healing.

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

Holy One, we confess that accountability can be discomfoting, and we avoid discomfort. We seek the good enough, convenient, and easy over the good, possible, and hard. Hold us accountable to the gospel. Hold us accountable to our claim and commitment to follow you. Hold us accountable to your will. Help us to receive your grace and liberate us from shame in order to embrace accountability as a loving act of community.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

Beloved, accountability from God is rooted in love, hope, and mercy. Know that your past actions and attitudes do not define your present nor limit your future. Through God's grace, you can grow, learn, and thrive.

***GLORIA:**

**Glory to the Creator,
and the Christ and the Spirit so near.
As it was from the start so it shall be forever,
One God always here. (repeat)**

**(end) One God always here.
One God always here.**

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Exodus 12:1-14

First Passover

12 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ² "This month will be the first month; it will be the first month of the year for you.^[a] ³ Tell the whole Israelite community: On the tenth day of this month they must take a lamb for each household, a lamb per house. ⁴ If a household is too small for a lamb, it should share one with a neighbor nearby. You should divide the lamb in proportion to the number of people who will be eating it. ⁵ Your lamb should be a flawless year-old male. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You should keep close watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month. At twilight on that day, the whole assembled Israelite community should slaughter their lambs. ⁷ They should take some of the blood and smear it on the two doorposts and on the beam over the door of the houses in which they are eating. ⁸ That same night they should eat the meat roasted over the fire. They should eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ Don't eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over fire with its head, legs, and internal organs. ¹⁰ Don't let any of it remain until morning, and burn any of it left

over in the morning. ¹¹ This is how you should eat it. You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet and your walking stick in your hand. You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹² I'll pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I'll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. I'll impose judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be your sign on the houses where you live. Whenever I see the blood, I'll pass over^[b] you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴ "This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the LORD. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 149 Page 722

EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have,*^[a] and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself.*^[b] ¹⁰ Love doesn't do anything

wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

The day is near

¹¹ As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. ¹² The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. ¹³ Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. ¹⁴ Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 18:15-20**

Sinning brother or sister

¹⁵ "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. ¹⁶ But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that *every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses.* ¹⁷ But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. ¹⁸ I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in

heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

These are the ancient words
revealed to us anew.
Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE: "Seeking the Stubborn"

(with thoughts from Rev. William Barclay)

In many ways, this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole of Matthew's gospel. It's difficulty lies in the undoubted fact that it does ring true to our ears; it does not sound like Jesus; it sounds much more like the regulations of a church committee.

I never thought about that before, but we can go even further. It is not possible that Jesus said this in its present form. Jesus could not have told his disciples to take things to the Church, for it did not exist; and the passage implies a fully developed and organized Church with a system of ecclesiastical discipline. What's more, it speaks of tax-collectors and Gentiles as unclaimable outsiders. We remember the stories of Jesus being accused of being the friend of tax-collectors

and sinners. This does not sound like our sweet Jesus who loves everybody. The tone of this passage is that there is a limit to forgiveness, that there comes a time when someone may be abandoned as beyond hope, a message which is impossible to think of Jesus giving. And the last verse actually seems to give the Church the power to retain and to forgive sins.

There are many reasons to make us think that this, as it stands, cannot be a correct report of the words of Jesus, but an adaptation made by the Church in later days, when Church discipline was rather a thing of rules and regulations than of love and forgiveness.

Although this passage is certainly not a correct report of what Jesus said, it is equally certain that it goes back to something he did say. Let's look behind it and come to the actual commandment of Jesus? At its widest, what Jesus was saying was: "if anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit the fault, and to get things right again between you." Basically, it means that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationships between us and another member of the Christian community.

Suppose something does go wrong, what are we to do to put it right? This passage gives us a whole scheme of action for the mending of

broken relationships within the Christian fellowship. We just read the steps to take. But why should we try?

After trying all these steps with no success, we could walk away and treat the person like a tax-collector or Gentiles, but that IS NOT what Jesus could have meant. We have read in other passages Jesus speaking to these people with sympathy and gentleness and an appreciation of their good qualities. Do you remember that? Here's an example of the necessity of reading the whole book and not making judgments about a few lines or chapters. We need to see the entire picture of Jesus; not just bits and pieces.

This whole passage is, in fact, not an injunction to abandon people. It is a challenge to win them with the love which can touch even the hardest heart. It is not a statement that some people are hopeless. Do you remember reading that Jesus ever used the word hopeless? All these steps for reconciliation mentioned today prove that Jesus has found no one hopeless – and neither must we.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

God of grace and God of glory. God of mercy and God of love. We must always remember that You and only You are the judge of all people. Our job is to love and care for all people you created for

this world. We must always remember the actions of Jesus that no one is hopeless.

No matter the disasters of our earth, others go to help; whether it be chain saws to cut fallen trees in pieces to provide open roads and to restore electricity. Whether it be providing shelter, blankets, water and food for the victims of disasters. And always prayers for them.

No matter the medical struggles in people in our neighbors, others go to drive them to medical facilities, bring them food, call them, send get well cards, and pray for them.

No matter how hard the work is to care for humanity, you give us the encouragement and strength to accomplish the task.

We pray for all those on our prayer list and all those we hold in our hearts that need prayers.

Dear Gracious God, ever treat us as hopeless, as each day we remember the words of your Son, .

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 debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from

**evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory forever. Amen.**

PRAYER RESPONSE: NCH 769

**Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God;
incline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.**

***UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION:**

**Gracious God, thank you for the gifts you give
and allowing us to be gift givers as well. May our
generous offerings bear fruit to nurture our
community, our neighbors, and all creation.**

***HOLY COMMUNION:**

May God be with you!

And also with you!

People of God, open your hearts.

**We open them to the One who feeds
us with freedom and hope.**

Children of God, sings songs of thanksgiving
to the One who journeys with you.

**Graced with abundant life, we join our hearts
and voices in praise to our loving God!**

The moment you spoke and liberated chaos, Holy
God, time marked the beginning of created
beauty and glory. You watered earth with tears of
joy, planting those seeds of hope and peace
so we might be fed by your heart.

But asked to simply be your children, we could
not obey that request, but wandered off to feast
at the table groaning with lies and curses.

Your gracious word was sung in new ways by
the prophets, but we tuned them out,
so we could listen to the seductive songs of sin.
You sent us your hope in Jesus Christ, who came
to set us free and bring us home from our exile in
rebellion.

Holy! Holy! Holy! Living God of grace!

All creation echoes your praise:

creatures roaming the fields,

dolphins splashing in the seas,

eagles soaring in the bright sky.

Glory to you forever and ever,

God of the captives!

You are righteousness, God our Deliverer,
and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Child, our
Brother.

Because we break your heart with our words
and deeds, he came to shatter the chains
of our arrogance and selfishness. Because we
have become gluttons, feasting on bitterness and
fear, he came to be the sweet Bread of healing
and hope.

Because we become drunk on sin's soured wine, he came to be salvation poured into our parched souls.

Because death smiles at us, waiting with open arms, he came to gather us up in the embrace of grace and life, carrying us out of the empty tomb into your life of joy forever.

As you have prepared this Table for us, gather us as your children, so we might remember all the promises fulfilled to us in Christ our Lord:

**When we eat of the Bread, Christ's life strengthens us;
when we drink from the Cup, Christ's Spirit nourishes us;
when we go to serve others, we proclaim Christ's death until he returns in glory.**

As you bless the gifts of the Bread and the Cup, anoint us with your Spirit which brings us together. As your grace touches our lips with hope and healing, may we reach out our hands to set free those captive to injustice.

As your peace is poured into the empty corners of our hearts, may we go forth to love others as much as we love ourselves, and to serve them as we show our love for you.

And when time has marked the end of history, and we gather with all our sisters and brothers, all division done away with, all brokenness healed,

all barriers pulled down, and all your children set free from despair, we will join our hands and hearts around your Table of eternity, singing praise through forever:

Glory to you, Liberating God!

Alleluia to you, Christ our Servant!

Thanks to you, Spirit of Peace!

Now and forever. Amen.

SHARING THE ELEMENTS:*UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING: We give thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us at your table by granting us the presence of Jesus Christ. Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and send us forth into the world in courage and peace, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our savior, Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

May we go from this gathering strengthened in love,
Encouraged by hope,
Pursuing and speaking God's peace,
And being good news in the world.