

15th Sunday After Pentecost
September 13, 2020
Matthew 18:21-35
Rev. Micol Cottrell, Grace United Church (Hanover)

Let's take a moment, take a breath, and let the air fill our lungs and relax our muscles

because things are not the way they were.

Today I'm preaching for the first time in six months from our sanctuary. It's good to be back

but things are not the way they were.

I'm preaching from the lectern not the pulpit or the floor because of social distancing,

I'm wearing a face mask for the care of the small number of people who are here with me

and to get used to what it will be like when more people join us.

Things are not the way they were.

There is a small group in the church today, as we fine tune how we will welcome some of you back when we resume in-person worship on Sunday September 27th and how we will continue to worship with many of you in your home.

Things are not the way they were.

Because of Covid-10 this community that we call Grace United is not the way it was.

So, let's take a moment, take a breath, and let the air fill our lungs and relax our muscles,

let us breath in and feel the Spirit of God filling us, holding us, connecting us together.

Even though things are not the way they were
God is with us and we are still called to be the church together.

We are a church disrupted because of the pandemic. We continue to search out a way to be the church together when much of how we worshiped, worked, and came together has to be different right now.

Moments when we find ourselves disrupted out of our routine life can be very challenging. It can shake up our identity and presents us with the fundamental question – who are we and how shall we live?

Today we hear a continuation of the scripture reading that we shared on September 6th. In the passage Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what to do when another member of the community of faith wrongs them. This leads to a lesson in forgiveness, of taking on the difficult, complex, and sometimes long process of holding onto and mending relationships. Today the scripture reading picks up where we left off on September 6th, repeating Jesus telling Peter that forgiveness is not something you mark down in a scorecard. Jesus then tells a parable of the forgiven servant who does not forgive another who owes him. The story is filled with hyperbole – intentional over exaggeration to prove a point – the amount the servant owes the king is unimaginable, the King's final response of torturing the slave is jarring and an overreaction. The hyperbole of the parable points out how important and urgent forgiveness is – it's as important as one's own life.

The early followers of Jesus learned pretty quickly just how challenging it is to be the church. Being in such an intimate relationship with one another means that people hurt each other, wrong each other, and fail each other both intentionally and unintentionally. These acts will at time disrupt the community and their shared life of worship and discipleship. These disrupted moments confront the disciples and the early church with the fundamental question of identity- who are they and how shall they live?

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For us, this pandemic is one of our big disruptions as a community of faith. Just as when conflict pulls at the fabric of relationship, in this disruption we are confronted with the question – who are we and how shall we live? Who are we and how do we live when not all of us can worship together in-person? Who are we and how do we live when our building cannot be a hub in the community providing space for the love and care for our self and our neighbours right now? Who are we and how shall we live when the physical distance between us at times feels very overwhelming and we long to hug, shake hands, sing, share coffee and experience physical closeness with one another as we did before? Who are we and how shall we live as a church when the very much beloved ways in which we worshiped, related, and lived out our discipleship together has been disrupted and changed because of this pandemic?

Today's scripture reading is about forgiveness. But it is also about identity and calling. Forgiveness is rooted in grace, in God's grace that fills our lives and that we in turn are called to share with those around us.

Grace is unconditional love that is not earned by getting points on a scorecard. Grace is abundant love that meets us where we are and for who we are with all of our strengths and flaws, successes and failures. Grace is the healing love that brings us forgiveness. Grace is the transformative love that strengthens us and gives us direction so that we can live how God intends us to live. Grace is God's love that flows through this universe and through all creation.

When Jesus tells his disciples to mend relationship with one another, gives the awesomely large number of seven times seventy and tells the parable that shows urgency and emphasis of forgiveness he is calling the church to live in God's grace. He is telling the church that life should be centred in this holy, unconditional, abundant, healing, and transformative love. The core of who we are and the life we are to live is centred in God's grace.

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Live in grace, Jesus call us. When someone wrongs us or we have wronged another we are called to live in grace. We are called to hold our self and each other in God's love and to not write each other off. When our lives are disrupted by pandemic and we face the reality that our church is very different than what we once knew we are called to live in grace. To continue to be the community of disciples walking in the path of Christ.

Living in grace means that we rest in God's love. We set down the burdens we carry with all of the wrongs we have done, our shortcomings, and our failures. We set down the burdens of the lies that we tell ourselves or that others have told us that we are not good enough, worthy enough, loveable, or that we are beloved children of God. We set down our

burdens in God's love as we worship together as community – be it together in person or from our homes. We set our burdens down in God's grace in order that we can do the work of healing relationship, of loving our self, God, one another, and all creation. Fueled by God's grace we take on the sometimes difficult and sometimes long work of healing, right relationship building, and justice making. Living in Grace we find the strength to love our self and do what we need to do to be healthy and work towards wholeness; we love one another as we work to restore relationship or find the way to move beyond the pain to life; we find the way to build up the Kin-dom of God where love, justice, and peace are a reality for all.

How many times does God respond to us with grace? Not seven but seven times seventy – beyond counting and scorekeeping. How do we respond to this Grace – we love one another and strive and fail and strive again, we wrestle with forgiveness and keep working on relationship, we love and we love and we love some more knowing that this is the way we join Christ in revealing the Kin-dom of God on earth. We love knowing that love is as important as life itself.

Friends, things are not the way they were. This pandemic has disrupted and continues to disrupt our lives and our church in profound ways. So who are we and how do we live? We are still God's beloved called to live in relationship. We are still people of grace called to live in and share God's abundant, unconditional, healing, and transformative love. Friends, come let us live in grace for we are all part of the amazing things that God is doing in this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People: (from Celebrate God's Presence, pg. 61)

Gracious God,
we pray for the faithful all over the world,
that all who love you may be united in your service.
We pray for the church
God, hear our prayer.
R. And in your love, answer.

We pray for the peoples and leaders of the nations,
that they may be reconciled one to another
in pursuit of your justice and peace.
We pray for the world
God, hear our prayer. **R.**

We pray for all who suffer from prejudice, greed or violence,
that the heart of humanity may warm with your tenderness.
We pray especially for all prisoners of politics or religion,
and for all refugees.
We pray for all who are oppressed
God, hear our prayer. **R.**

We pray for all in need
by reason of famine, flood or earthquake,
that they may know the hope of your faithfulness
through the help of others.
We pray especially for the people of
God, hear our prayer. **R.**

We pray for the land, the sea, and the sky,
 that we may live with respect in creation
 and use your gifts with reverence.
 We pray for the earth
 God, hear our prayer. **R.**

We pray for all who suffer the pain of sickness,
 loneliness, fear or loss,
 that those whose names are in our hearts,
 in the hearts of others,
 or known to you alone,
 may receive strength and courage.
 We pray for those in need
 God, hear our prayer. **R.**

God of compassion,
 into your hands we commend all for whom we pray,
 trusting in your mercy, now and forever.

Gracious God,
 we pray for the faithful all over the world,
 that all who love you may be united in your service.
 We pray for the church
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R. And in your love, answer.

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God, hear our prayer. **R.**

God of compassion,
into your hands we commend all for whom we pray,
trusting in your mercy, now and forever.

We pray for Allan and Marjorie Gates,
for the family and friends of Bob Forth,
for students and their families, for those who work in education,

And in silence we offer our individual prayers to you:

We join these prayers with the prayers of all creation. Amen.

Amen.