

Sept 3, 2023 – Bonni-Belle Pickard

Pre-service music

From heaven you came – StF 272

Breathe on me, Breath of God – StF 340

Beyond these walls of worship

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Call to worship

I'm coming back to the heart of worship – StF 437

Prayer

Romans 12

Meditation

Lord, you have my heart – StF 559

Intercessions

Brother, Sister, let me serve you – StF 611

Benediction

O Thou who camest from above – StF 564

Prayer

Lord of life and love and all that is good and holy,
We gather to worship you today –
From our separate places – our homes, the rooms where we live our everyday lives –
Some of us gathered with others in our churches –
Some of us on our own
But all of us with you, Lord Jesus,
 Gathered to worship, to listen, to remember
 To breathe in your life and love and peace.

Be with us, Lord Jesus.
Remind who you are
And who you need us to be.
Remind us how you were with us –
 Accepting each of us – and loving us into all we were made to be.
Remind us how we are to be with each other –
 Also accepting each other – our faults, our fancies, our strengths, our struggles –
 Also helping each other to grow into who you need us to be.
Amen.

Romans 12

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

This reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans
Has come alive for me in recent days
As I've been reading a book by New Testament scholar, Paula Gooder
Who specializes in the letters of Paul.
One of Paula's recent books is entitled *Phoebe: A Story*,
And Paula Gooder uses her creativity to flesh out
what Phoebe's life might have been.
She imagines Phoebe as a former slave -- one of countless persons in the ancient world
Caught up in the aftermath of warfare or calamity
Persons who became slaves against their will --
in this case, a household servant.
In Paula Gooder's imagined story, Phoebe is orphaned as a child in a war
and becomes the property of an army general who treats her well
but eventually hands her over to another master
Who takes her as a concubine -- until she becomes pregnant and gives birth --
Then the new master disposes of both Phoebe and her child...
The story imagines Phoebe eventually being freed through the efforts of a concerned person --
A Christian connected with her original owner --
And then, in her freedom, Phoebe slowly realizing the true freedom she has in Christ --
As well as what it means to be a 'slave of Christ' --
Perspectives most of us would rarely be able to think through!

Phoebe comes in contact with Paul while living in Corinth,
And then takes a letter from him back from Corinth to Rome --
To share with the tiny group of Christians gathered there --
To encourage them, to confront them, to pass on what is essential...
Phoebe understood the main point of Paul's letter
Was to enable preparations to be made for him to arrive in Rome
And then to travel on to Spain to tell people there about The Way...
As it turns out, we're not sure that Paul ever made it to Rome again --
Or to Spain....
But the story Paula Gooder tells is not overly concerned
About how or whether the planned mission strategy takes place.
The essence is about what Phoebe and the early Roman Christians
Learned about following Jesus --
And about living Jesus' lives in their own lives --
Right where they were --
In the midst of persecution and disputes and hardship....

*'Doesn't it upset you when people get offended?' Phoebe asked [Junia,
who had been remembering the many times
she had been pelted with rancid food scraps in the streets --
for daring to tell about Jesus]*

*'Why should it? The message of Jesus is offensive.' Junia shrugged.
'For those who love success, he represents failure;
for those who are comfortable, he brings disquiet;
he topples those who know themselves to be right;
he disturbs those who are pleased with themselves.
I'd be more upset if they weren't offended.'*

*I sometimes wonder what the Good News of Jesus will look like
when it doesn't upset people anymore.'*

Reading Paula Gooder's story gave me a different idea of what the early church was about –

They didn't have a 'church' to worship in,

But they would gather at someone's home –

Usually someone with a big enough house to accommodate the group –

When Phoebe first arrives in Rome,

She went to stay at the workshop space used by Priscilla and Aquila

For their tent-making business.

It's there that she hands over the letter she's brought from Paul –

And it's there that she engages in conversation with those who welcomed her.

We know they would 'worship' – but what would that look like?

Very few of the folk would have actually met Jesus in person while he was alive –

They would know of him from what they had heard from Paul and others

Stories that had been passed on

Of a person who had literally changed lives –

Imagine yourself gathering with friends to remember someone who had died or left recently –

You'd share stories of when you were together

What the loved one said or did ...

The stories would make you feel closer to the departed one –

And to the others sharing stories with you.

You might sing favourite songs together or read bits of scripture that had been important.

You would do and say the things that brought you closer to the departed one:

To Jesus

And you would feel his Spirit with you again...

Some of those gathered with you for worship

Might have come from Jewish background

And so would have the Hebrew scripture or songs to share.

Some would have heard about Jesus from Paul or others –

Perhaps they'd have heard someone audaciously speaking of Jesus in the streets!

It had seemed scandalous at the time,

Because to publicly worship anyone but Caesar was very dangerous.

But those listeners had found themselves drawn in and wanting to know more

About the one who had known God in such a different way –

Who had spoken about a God of love

Rather than a God who needed to be appeased...

Perhaps they had listened from a distance for a while

But gradually allowed themselves to come closer...

And there they had found a different kind of society, a different kind of love.

Sometimes the group had meals together –

Indeed, Jesus had instructed everyone to eat together –

How to do that in reality?

It could get really tricky,

Because the Jews weren't allowed to eat with the Gentiles –

Or even use the same dishes...

And even if the Jews and Gentiles could find a way,

What about the slaves and the masters?

And men and women who weren't in the same family?
Just when you thought you had Jesus' message of love and acceptance
all figured out in your head
Then you had to figure out how to do it with your body as well...
Sometimes it was just exhausting...

Except, it was exhilarating as well!
And Jesus' Spirit was indeed upon them
And they found themselves gathering early each morning
Before the workday began
To pray together – to share their joys and sorrows and challenges...
That worship was an essential part of who they were
And the community being established.
The leaders sprang up amongst them –
As they listened together to where the Spirit led them.

*It took her a while to emerge from sleep,
but when she had, and had dressed and come down to the [Priscilla and Aquila's] workshop,
Phoebe found a dozen or so people gathered quietly together.
She looked around them, a little startled.*

'We like to gather together in the morning to pray,' said Aquila.

'Why didn't you tell me before?'
*Phoebe guiltily thought of all the mornings in the previous week
when she had slept well past dawn and breakfast time.*

*'We thought you needed the sleep,' said Prisca,
'but today you have so much to do
we thought some time spent in the presence of Jesus would be time well spent.
Come,' she gestured to a space.*

*Phoebe settled into it with slight hesitation...
She wasn't at all sure what to expect. She needn't have worried.*

*It was very simple. They talked, read a psalm, and prayed for all those they knew.
Phoebe found herself relaxing, and before long felt enfolded in a strong sense of peace,
bound together with the others around her....*

They would gather to worship and then go to whatever work there was –
At home or in the bazaar or the workplace –
For some, there was the work of caring for the widows –
And for those who had no way of surviving on their own –
Freed slaves who were actually abandoned, freed slaves with no way to support themselves,
Orphans, outcastes...
Those who had something shared with those who had none –
And supervisors were needed to make sure everyone had enough....

In the evenings, they might meet up again –
And especially if there was a new letter from Paul to hear!

Everyone listened carefully to the reader – who might be the only one able to read!

 If they didn't know Paul themselves, they knew of him.

There were certainly disagreements about what he said from time to time –

 But they all knew Paul's letters came from his heart –

 And so they listened carefully.

And then they discussed it amongst themselves.

Paul's letter talked about 'offering up one's body' –

 is that not what slaves were *forced* to do?

Why would a free person want to bend that low?

 If one were a slave, how would 'offering one's body'

 Be a 'sacrifice' – something given freely?

They were very real and very difficult questions to ponder.

Paul's letter talked about 'not conforming to this world' –

 did Paul really think they could think and act differently

 Than what they'd been brought up to do and know?

'That's the way I was brought up' we still say today.

 That's my understanding of how the world works.

 I know my place and I know what's expected.

 Rocking the boat can get me in a lot of trouble – it could even get me killed.

A slave could be thinking:

 If I don't bow down as commanded, to wealth and privilege and power –

 It could be all over.

Did Paul really know what he was saying?

Of course, as soon as one asked that question,

 They knew that Paul was daily living out exactly what he was saying –

 Being arrested and flogged and imprisoned and starved and stoned

 For living and doing what he knew of Jesus.

Letters from Paul were to be listened to carefully

 And absorbed and pondered over –

Paul always seemed to be going on about treating others with respect –

 About honouring differences –

It was true that there was a lot of dis-honouring going on –

 Whether consciously or unconsciously.

There were often disputes amongst themselves.

 How could there not be, when they had all come from such different backgrounds?

And yet there was something about coming together in their differences

 To listen and reflect together

That slowly but surely formed them into a community

 That made a witness to those around them.

Often it was easier to stay secret – the repercussions of being found out could be deadly.

 But people began to notice.

Sometimes the wrong people noticed –

 But sometimes, the 'wrong people' turned out to be

 just the people who needed to hear the Good News...

When Paul reminded the new followers of The Way to ‘rejoice’ and not give up hope,
To be patient in suffering, to bless those who persecuted them
He wasn’t talking about social pleasantries –
He was talking about their real life-and-death situations.
It wasn’t hard to find – or know – persecution—
It could come from one’s own family or neighbours –
Anyone still caught up in trying to please a system
Where ‘honour’ was given only to those with the most wealth or power –
And everyone else’s survival depended on concurring with that ‘honour’.
Would struggle at best to understand a system
Where one’s status was based on being the most loving
Rather than the most ruthless.

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Two thousand years later, we have lost some of the urgency of the early Christians –
As we heard in the passage I quoted earlier:

‘... what the Good News of Jesus will look like
when it doesn’t upset people anymore?’

When *we* gather for worship,

Are we really intent on gathering closer to the source of our nourishment –
Of joining our Spirits with Jesus and absorbing his peace?

Do we listen to the one preaching or praying or reading scripture
With an eagerness to hear God speaking?

Or are we more ready to make a judgement
on to whether they’re doing it properly?

Do we take the time to discuss with others what we’ve heard?
That’s very difficult to do when we worship online! --

But might we make the effort to be in dialogue with someone
About what God is saying to them – or to us?

When we sing our hymns,

Are we more concerned about whether we know the tune
Than about what the words and melody are saying to us?

Are the words more *about* God or ourselves?

Are our prayers more about reading God a shopping list
Of concerns we think we must have

Or about raising up the cries of our hearts
And the cries of those around us

And listening carefully to what God has to say to us about those cries?

When is the last time we have gathered close enough to the others in worship

To hear the way they draw a breath
Or the sigh of their heart?

When have we been close enough to reach for a hand to hold?

When have we last bathed the wounds of another –
Whether a physical or an inner wound?

‘Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep,’ Paul says.

That’s more than watching the same broadcast or the same sermon in the same room
And then leaving again to continue doing things our own way.

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Later this month, we will be having a Circuit Meeting and a Circuit Away Day.

I'm wondering what Paul would have made of our Methodist Circuit system –
Our systems of coming together to confer –
Systems that have evolved to take care of business most efficiently,
But also have made us somewhat devoid of our ability
to listen carefully to God and each other.

At the heart of our conferences and our meetings
Is 'conferring' – listening hard together –
To what God is saying to and with and through each of us.

Not all of us will be at the Circuit Meeting or the Away Day –
Most of us tuning in to this broadcast will be worshipping on our own today –
Or perhaps with a family member of two.

God still needs us to 'confer' with each other,
To enable ourselves and each other to listen more carefully
And to tell each other what we've heard.

Perhaps we need to re-think our worship
In those terms: how can we listen to and talk to God together?

What kind of worship will draw us closer to God and each other?
And how will our worship inspire and equip us in sharing the Good News to others?
Not many of us will be pelted with rancid food
Or jailed or flogged – or crucified for telling today...
But we do have the new challenge of figuring out how to do all of this online....

Lord God, we come to you again in prayer
As we consider what you have called us to be:
A people of love and peace and joy.

Lord God, you give us situations each day
When we must choose between what is good and what is evil,
What is right and what is wrong,
What is true and what is false.
These choices sometimes are not easy,
Especially when we consider what the consequences might be.

Thank you, Lord, for reminding us that we are not the first to struggle with these choices.
We thank you for the example of Paul and Phoebe,
Of the early followers of The Way
Who looked to you because The Way was new and unexplored.

As we worship together, you remind us, too, that we are not alone now.
You have raised up women and men in every age to work together for you –
And now we thank you for those who worship and work with us.
We thank you for opportunities to ‘rejoice in hope and be patient in suffering’
Because we know that you will be with us in the struggle.
We pray for others whom we know who are struggling.
Help them know your love and hope as well –
And help us to share with them what we have,
Weep with those who weep,
Rejoice with those who rejoice,
So that, together, we will all flourish.

Lord God, we think today of those around us who are difficult to live with.
Remind us that each of these is also your beloved child.
Remind us that we rarely know what is behind each face,
Behind each action, behind the thought of another.
Help us be gentle with each other, even as you are gentle with us.
Remind us not to attempt to overcome evil with acts of revenge,
But to overcome evil with good.

Be with our leaders, Lord. Give them clear vision and strong determination
To lead in ways that promote the common good
And that lead us to you.
Be with those who work at common tasks all around us.
Give us grateful hearts for the everyday tasks done
That make all our lives fuller and richer.

Keep showing us, Lord, The Way that will bring us all closer to each other and to you.
We ask in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Who taught us to pray this way:
Our Father, who are 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 trespass against us.
And deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory. Now and forever. Amen.

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel
And the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages
But is now disclosed,
And through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles,
According to the command of the eternal God,
to bring about the obedience of faith –
To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen