September 13, 2020

Lectionary 24A

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalm 103:[1-7] 8-13

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

*Note that these preaching and worship aids were created prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to connect the assigned Sunday lectionary texts to “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday. Preachers and worship leaders will need to carefully adapt these resources to the reality of a worldwide pandemic and the current needs of the local community. Additional worship resources for this time of pandemic may be found at* [ELCA.org/PublicHealth](http://www.elca.org/publichealth/).

**For the Preacher**

One of the principles of restorative justice, rooted in many Indigenous traditions, is that the whole community has a role in working together to repair harm. While individuals responsible for particular harms are still held accountable for making amends, the whole community works together, recognizing that brokenness in people, relationships and communities is always part of a larger system of relationships.

That’s what we see in the lectionary readings today.

In Genesis 50, Joseph comes face-to-face with the brothers who left him to be sold into slavery. Though he ultimately comes out in a position of power and influence, Joseph’s life is full of tragedy and separation from his family. He has every right to demand revenge or at least to rage in anger. But by the grace of God he sees the bigger picture of what is possible for the future — connection to family and the feeding of those who are hungry. This does not erase, excuse or minimize his brothers’ horrible actions, but it holds it in the larger possibility of creating healing for the sake of the future. Rather than anger, the conversation turns to making sure the whole region is fed through a time of famine.

In Romans 14, Paul addresses quarreling in the Roman church. The theological positions and their implications for daily practice are not insignificant, but they pale in comparison to the larger importance of community rooted in the shared experience of God’s grace. Paul addresses the conflict and the brokenness not by defining a right position but calling the community back to mutual support and understanding. The restoration of relationships is more important than being on the right side of the issue.

So, too, in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 18. Trying to help the disciples grasp the power of forgiveness, he tells them a story of a deeply indebted slave. The king forgives the massive debt, presumably with the expectation that such forgiveness will bear fruit both for that individual and for the larger community. But the debt-released slave fails to see that larger community of which he is a part, instead focusing only on what he is still owed. He seems unable to reflect outward the generosity he, himself, has received, and it is to the detriment of himself and the community. The king’s condemnation of the slave is in part due to his failure to recognize the interconnectedness of the community and the power of forgiveness and healing when they are extended into that web of relationships.

Each of these instances presents a scenario of something in the community in need of healing and reconciliation. Each requires incredible courage to cross a divide, to confront the reality of brokenness, and to initiate a process of forgiveness and healing. All of the situations are held in the grace and forgiveness of God, and all of them remind us that the whole community has a role to play in coming together to support one another in the healing of that which is broken.

It is to this courageous act that we are called week after week when we are sent out from worship to serve God. Especially on this “God’s work. Our hands” Sunday, we have an opportunity to look for places in our community in need of peace, grace, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. We are invited to see the hurting people, the broken relationships, the incredible need that hinders our flourishing as a community. Whether today we address hunger or homelessness, sickness or loneliness, despair or conflict, we have an opportunity to participate in the kind of world that God has already begun among us. We have an opportunity to gather as part of a larger community to support healing and wholeness.

We often reduce the meaning of these and other passages to forgiveness of interpersonal wrongs. But at the heart of all of them is the healing of the whole community and the responsibility of the whole community to participate together in the healing and forgiveness process. The need in our communities is sometimes caused by the choices of one or more individuals, but much more often caused or made worse by all the complex ways our society is organized. To reach out in healing, whatever the need and whatever the cause, is a chance for us to participate in the larger picture of God’s broad community.

God’s love poured out for us is a gift so large we cannot fathom it. Our joyful response is to engage the work of pouring out that love for others. That’s what “God’s work. Our hands” Sunday is about. Not building a world of love — that is Christ’s work, but extending our hands so that the overflowing love of God might pour out to the world in ways that bring our communities together and bring healing and wholeness for all.

**Hymn Suggestions**

Below are a variety of hymns from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* that resonate with the readings of the day and highlight love put into action.

*During this time of the pandemic, in-person assembly singing is not recommended. When safe to do so, a soloist or small ensemble may sing hymns, with the congregation praying through attentive listening. Online worship opportunities may use these hymns, ensuring appropriate copyright licensing and encouraging worshipers to sing from home.*

360 “Love Consecrates the Humblest Act”

*Roots our service in Christ’s love as displayed through washing feet.*

482 “I Come with Joy”

*Highlights the community reconciliation that happens in sharing communion as well as a joyful move outward to service in the last verse.*

538 “Enviado soy de Dios” / “The Lord Now Sends Us Forth”

*A joyful sending song that connects our work to God’s work.*

543 “Go, My Children, with My Blessing”

*Highlights the forgiveness extended to us and the invitation to “grow in love and love by serving.”*

546 “To Be Your Presence”

*Provides diverse images for serving including extending mercy, feeding the hungry and advocating for others.*

548 “Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen”

*The connection between mercy and service is rooted in God’s love encountered in worship.*

549 “Thuma mina, Nkosi yam” / “Send Me, Jesus”

*A sending song that can be sung in worship or at a service site without the need for printed music.*

603 “God, When Human Bonds Are Broken

*Rooted in the Spirit’s work of reconciliation in us, we pray to “use us as a means of blessing” and “to give us love to go on learning.”*

610 “O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come”

*Prays for the kind of wholeness and restoration in our common life that “shall reach the whole of human need.”*

639 “Pues si vivimos” / “When We Are Living”

*Based on a verse from the second reading, this hymn invites us to find God in our relationship with those in need.*

706 “Un pueblo que camina” / “The People Walk”

*The second verse names Christ’s liberating forgiveness as we pray in hope for the needs of the world.*

722 “O Christ, Your Heart, Compassionate”

*Prays for the creation of new hearts that we might yield our hearts and hands and become a “servant church that walks your servant ways.”*

**Prayers of Intercession**

*The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.*

With open hands and open hearts, let us pray for the needs of all the world.

Generous Provider, renew the strength, energy and courage of your church. Through our acts of service, may your love overflow and your grace be proclaimed for us, for our neighbors and for all the world. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

Generous Provider, we celebrate the earth that yields its fruit in due season. Make us good neighbors to every corner of creation. Save us from our desire to hoard abundant resources for ourselves at the expense of other people and of the earth itself. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

Generous Provider, guide leaders who set economic policy. Set free those burdened by debt. Provide assistance to those who cannot make ends meet. Teach us to steward our gifts with generosity and with concern for the whole community. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

Generous Provider, raise up daily bread where there is famine. Bring nourishing food to those who live in food deserts. Create networks of support to feed the hungry in our communities. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

Generous Provider, you heal all diseases, comfort all sorrows, restore all things. Make our hands, our feet, our mouths and our hearts agents of that healing in the world. Especially today we pray for… [*local needs may be named*]. Bring healing to those suffering from the coronavirus and lead researchers to a vaccine. Guide us in boldly serving the needs of neighbors near and far, especially today as we serve [*name today’s service project(s)*]. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

Generous Provider, your love holds us in life and in death. Thank you for the faithful witness of those who have died. Direct our vision to the time when every knee shall bow, every tongue confess and every hand reach out to serve in praise of you. God of abundant grace,

**Open your healing hands.**

We commend these and all things to your gracious care, trusting in Christ Jesus, our Savior. **Amen.**

**Blessing**

The God of compassion, hope and joy,

Our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,

Bless your feet to carry you into places of need.

Bless your lips to proclaim love and mercy.

Bless your heart to love and listen to those you encounter.

Bless your hands to care for the needs of your neighbors.

Bless you to be a blessing to others.

Now and always.

**Amen.**