

Welcome and Notices

Call to worship

Come to the God who knows us,
to the God who created our being,
to the God who knows our frailty,
to the God who loves and cherishes us beyond measure.
Come as you are and worship God.

Praise: For the beauty of the earth
For the beauty of the earth
For the beauty of the skies
For the love
Which from our birth
Over and around us lies
Over and around us lies
Lord of all to thee we raise
This our joyful hymn of praise
For the beauty of the hour
Of the day and of the night
Hill and vale
And tree and flower
Sun and moon and stars of light
Lord of all to thee we raise
This our joyful hymn of praise
For the joy of human love
Brother, sister, parent, child
Friends on earth
And friends above
For a gentle
Thoughts and mild
For a gentle
Thoughts and mild
Lord of all to thee we raise
This our joyful hymn of praise
For each perfect gift of thine
To our race so freely given
Graces human and divine
Flowers of earth and buds of heav'n
Flowers of earth and buds of heav'n
Lord of all to thee we raise
This our joyful hymn, our joyful hymn of praise
This our joyful hymn of praise

Candles video

Praise: I've got peace like a river

Prayer / Lord's Prayer

Here we are again, God
With all that makes us who we are,
all that fills our lives;
Carrying into this place of joy and freedom

the burdens we just can't seem to lay down,
The weight of all the scores we long to have settled,
the justice we want to demand
for the wrongs we have suffered

Yet we also know what would happen if you were to deal with us justly;
with our greeds and violences, our betrayals and lusts.
If justice was served in our lives we could not stand.

So forgive us our wrongs, God,
forgive us as we do not deserve;
forgive us against the demands of justice;
And forgive our obsession that justice be done
to those who have wronged us.

May our worship lead us to the place
where our hunger for grace and mercy may be filled,
And where we may be freed from the tyranny of vengeance. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 18:21 - 35

Sermon: How many times?

In case you have not noticed, our faith is one in which the sinners have all the advantages. They can step on your feet fifty times and you are supposed to keep smiling. They can whisper behind your back every time you leave the room and it is your job to excuse them with no thought of getting even.

The burden is on you, because you have been forgiven yourself, and God expects you to do unto others what he has done unto you.

Now I don't think this is the wrong motivation for learning how to forgive. If God is willing to stay with me in spite of my meanness, my weakness, my stubborn self-righteousness, then who am I to hold those same things against someone else? Better I should confess my own sins rather than keep track of yours. The trouble is, it is really hard to stay focused on my shortcomings.

I would so much rather stay focused on yours, especially when they are hurtful to me. Staying angry with you is how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it is also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works, only there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness, and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul.

Now on its own, anger is not that damaging. It is not much more than that quick rush of adrenaline you feel when you are being threatened. It tells you that something you hold dear is in danger - your property, your beliefs, your physical safety. I think of anger as a kind of flashing amber light. "Caution," it says, "something is going on here. Slow down and see if you can figure out what it is."

When I do slow down, I can usually learn something from my anger, and if I'm lucky I can use the energy it generates to push for change in myself or in my relationships with others.

I can, in other words, figure out what my anger has to teach me and then let it go, but when my anger goes on and on without my learning or changing anything, then it is not plain anger anymore. It has become bitterness instead. It has become resentment.

So there is another motivation for learning how to forgive - not only because we owe it to God but because we owe it to ourselves. Because resentment deforms us. Because unforgiveness is a boomerang. We use it to protect ourselves to hurt back before we can be hurt again - but it has a sinister way of circling right back at us so that we become the victims of our own ill will.

We've all been there at one time or another haven't we. We've flown off the handle, said and done things that have turned us into someone that we thought we would never become. And that's the trouble - as someone once said, "Sin makes the sinner unrecognizable," and the only antidote to it is forgiveness. The problem is that anger is so exciting, so enlivening, that forgiveness can seem like a weak surrender.

If you have ever cherished a resentment, you know how right it can make you feel to have someone in the world whom you believe is wrong. You may not be up to admitting it yet, but one of the great benefits of having an enemy is that you get to look good by comparison. It also helps to have someone to blame for why your life is not turning out the way it was supposed to.

"After all, losing an enemy is as upsetting as losing a friend."

I must admit I haven't thought about it in that way before. Could it be that when you allow your enemy to stop being your enemy, all the rules change? Nobody knows how to act anymore, because forgiveness is an act of transformation.

It does not offer the adrenaline rush of anger, not the feeling of power that comes from a well-established resentment. It is a quiet revolution, as easy to miss as a fist uncurling to become an open hand, but it changes people in ways that anger only wishes it could.

So why don't we do it more often? Because it is scary, to lay down your arms like that, to trade in your pride and your power on the off chance that you may discover something more valuable than either of them.

So, what do I gain out of the bargain? The chance to live again, free from the bitterness that draws the sweetness from my life, that gives me a very scary face and sometimes turns me into a monster. No one else does this to us. We do it to ourselves, but we do not have to.

We are being forgiven by God every day of our lives. We are being set free by someone who has arranged things so that we have all the advantages. We have choices. We have will. And we have an advocate, who seems to know that we need lots of practice at this forgiveness business.

How often should we forgive? Will seven times take care of it? "Not seven times," Jesus said, "but, I tell you, seventy seven times." This should never be a chore. This is a promise, because forgiveness is the way of life.

It is God's cure for the deformity our resentments cause us. It is how we discover our true shape, and every time we do it, we get to experience a little more of what it is to be alive in Jesus. What God knows and we don't yet, is that once we get the hang of it, seventy times seven won't be enough, not to mention seventy-seven. We'll be so carried away by it that we'll hope it never ends.

Praise: Dear Lord and Father of mankind

1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper rev'ence, praise.
2. O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,

Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

3. Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.
4. Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small Voice of calm.
5. In simple trust like theirs who heard
Beside the Syrian sea
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee.

Prayers of Intercession

In a world where violence seems to rule,
we commit, O God, to small random acts of peace making.

Where people are oppressed
because they look, act, speak, think or love differently
we will affirm their freedom.

Where people are exploited
because they lack the strength or resources to refuse,
we will seek to create alternatives.

Where people are controlled
through threat and fear,
we will offer safety and hope.

Where people believe their violence and power
give them the right and ability to act as they please
we will call them to account.

Wherever violence is done to another,
through physical force, manipulation of truth,
or the subtle workings of power,
we will opt out,
we will speak out,
and we will stand out in opposition,
through small, random acts of peace making.

Praise: Make me a channel of your peace
Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord
And where there's doubt, true faith in You

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope

Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness, ever joy

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of Your peace
It is pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life

Benediction

Into a world of noise and confusion;
into a world that bewilders and even bemuses us at times;
into a world of delight and regret;
into a world of hope and fear;
into a world that is ever changing,
we go with the message of an unchanging God
who gave his all that we might live life to the best of our ability.
God of all, go with us and within us,
this and every day.