

October 1, 2023 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalm 25:1-9, Philippians 2:1-13,
Matthew 21:23-32

**Encouragement and consolation, compassion and love, joy, deep joy, to you,
beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen**

I invite us to begin... by breathing:

Breathe in the love of God, the compassion of Christ.

And breathe out your worries, your distractions.

Breathe in the love of God, the encouragement of Christ.

And breathe out what pulls you apart, what pulls us apart.

Breathe in the love of God, the sharing of the Spirit.

And breathe out what isolates, what separates.

Let me paint a picture this morning.

You can close your eyes if that makes it easier to visualize.

It's a snippet of our worship service, admittedly from my view.

People are coming up for Holy Communion.

Older ones, maybe with a walker, sometimes with an adult child or a spouse or a friend at their side.

Younger ones, squirmy ones, reaching out, they know this meal is special.

Tired ones, hungry ones, stressed out ones, carrying the burdens and joys of the week.

All of us, hands open for a bit of Jesus, to hear again: Body of Christ, **for you.**

While folks make their way from the rail, some pause to light candles.

A few each week ask for healing prayer, honest and vulnerable in the midst of it all.

Some dip in the baptismal font, marking that watery cross on your own forehead or someone else's.

The light streams through the stained glass,

and through it all, we're singing, and singing, and singing some more.

There is an orderly holy hubbub in our sanctuary during this time in our service.

people moving around, interacting, genuinely engaged, the Spirit guiding,

aware that we are at once held by God, and called to be so much more.

Thanks for letting me paint that picture—I'll come back to this image.

This morning, it's our reading from Philippians upon which we focus.

You heard it already: Make my joy complete...

Be of the same mind, having the same love....

Jesus emptied himself, poured out himself, taking human form...

He was obedient even to the point of death on a cross. And God exalted him...

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...For it is God who is at work in you.

Typically, this passage is read on Palm Sunday, at the start of Holy Week's journey to the cross.

But it is rich at any time of year and it includes a section called the Christ Hymn.

Maybe Paul wrote the hymn, or more likely Paul is quoting these ancient words,

a shard of the earliest poetry and devotion materials from the followers of Jesus.

I'm feeling caught this morning for there is much to share, maybe we need a bible study on this passage.

For now though three phrases and some stories.

The first is this: "Be of one mind."

Paul was writing in Greek and the verb he uses (3 times, I'd add) is Phroneo (from EH o).

It's a verb that doesn't translate well into English, so it's hard to get at what Paul intended.

Be of one mind with one another, and be of the same mind with Christ:

Embody (it's a verb) your understanding.

Think practical wisdom and the linking of head and heart.

Imitate the way of Jesus. Take on Jesus' posture.

As many of you have heard, our congregation is in the midst of discernment.

We've been given a generous donation with some simple guidance

to use it to strengthen our congregation inwardly

so that we are better able to reach outward to our neighbors.

We're in a season of generating ideas:

listening closely to one another, listening to our neighbors, and listening to the Spirit's call.

We're discerning.

Many have participated in this discernment—and there are still more opportunities.

Ultimately our congregation's board, the Vision and Governance Board,

will take all this listening, all this discernment,

and we'll seek some consensus as a way forward.

Consensus isn't uniformity, but unity, a process of shaping our hearts together, of acting and interacting.

In a meeting recently, someone recalled our process of becoming a sanctuary congregation

back in the early winter of 2017 (do you remember that time?)

after the election,

when our immigrant neighbors were terrified.

As a congregation we did a lot of discernment in a condensed timespan..

The Board found consensus around a Sanctuary Statement, and

soon we were face to face with God's beloved in need of safe space, of Sanctuary,

and it transformed us.

Be of one mind. Imitate the way of Jesus. Take on Jesus' posture.

The second phrase flows from the first: "Emptying himself."

Jesus' way of being in the world, Jesus' posture is self-emptying.

This breathing practice we've done today is a physical way of self-emptying.

Breathe in the love of God, the compassion of Christ.

And breathe out your fears.

Friends, individual discernment is one thing.

Discernment as a community is a whole other thing.

Did you wonder why this seems hard? Because it is!

It requires us to be "in" enough to have hopes and ideas, and to share these ideas,

It invites us to pray and trust and stay engaged.

And at the same time (and this is higher level stuff)

we also let go of the possessiveness we have to our own ideas,

trust the process, trust the Holy Spirit. Self-emptying.

This doesn't mean erasing ourselves, or thinking that our own needs or safety don't matter.

Self-emptying doesn't mean we should hate ourselves. That's not what self-emptying is about.

Rather self-emptying means setting aside the more surface level self that is competing, insecure, grasping,

for this deeper part of ourselves that is connected to something larger, something divine,

This is an incredibly counter cultural way of being community.

What is the identity and the calling of this community that is greater than any one person's ideas?

How do we create and trust a process that allows for this calling to emerge? (pause)

**Finally here's the third phrase: Work out your salvation, literally your salvos, your healing,
"For it is God who is at work in you."**

At a recent Vision and Governance Board meeting, Pastor Maria encouraged us
to think not just with our heads about ideas for the donation,
but with our hearts, about the "why?"

Why is this idea or that idea important to us?

What do we value as a congregation?

How can our dreams and decisions be grounded in these values?

How can recalling stories, like our own experience of becoming a Sanctuary Congregation...
how can this ground us?

How does it remind us of how God is already at work in us?

The story I shared at the beginning, about Communion and the holy hubbub...

that's been an image that is helping me get in touch with what I value in this community:
we are embodied,
we are awake to the complexity of this world,
we are present to the sacred, and present to one another,
we are inward facing and at once launching toward what is next.

It is God who is at work in us.

What exactly we should do with such a generous donation, I'm not the one to say, we do that together.

I believe we can lean into our this holy hubbub,

this active and engage way of being faithful followers of Jesus.

Walking the walk. Genuinely holding the complexity.

God is (already) at work in us.

Dear ones, our next hymn is a prayer.

You might notice that it's written in the singular, O Christ, surround ME.

You can sing it just as it's written, or, in the Spirit of Philippians, you can play a little in your voice or mind:

O Christ, surround ME. O Christ, surround US. May it be so. Amen.