



Call to Worship:

Surely God's goodness and love will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in his presence forever.

Hymn: STF 565 Only by grace can we enter

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnaQIMtQ820&t=247s>

*Only by grace can we enter,
only by grace can we stand;
not by our human endeavour
but by the blood of the Lamb.
Into your presence you call us,
you call us to come,
into your presence you draw us
and now by your grace we come,
now by your grace we come.*

*Lord if you mark our transgressions
who will stand?
Thanks to your grace we are cleansed
by the blood of the Lamb.*

Gerrit Gustafson
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Prayer

Reflect upon the words of the 23rd Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Thank God for being the one who provides for you and the one in whose presence all our days will be lived out.

Thank God that this does not depend upon us; upon our achievements or virtues. We enter God's presence because he desires it; he invites us; and, through Jesus, he has made it possible. Only by grace can we enter. Only by grace can we stand.

Thank God that he provides for our daily needs; guides our journeys and never leaves us in the face of danger, enemies and even death.

Confess to God that often we can feel shame or guilt or fear, anxious that we might not be good enough for God's standards. We forget that it is only by grace that anyone is accepted by God and nothing that can be deserved.

Confess, too, that often we can be like the lost sheep - in the presence of our Father God but turning our back on him and going our own way with disastrous consequences.

Confess your anxieties about God's providing for your needs or for your protection. We are human and can respond fearfully to the changing world around us. Pray that God will help us to trust him more and more for he is always 'trustworthy, faithful and true'.

And, above all, thank God that he loves you. Give thanks for the love that we see in his shepherding care for us and for the love we see in his sending Jesus into the world to break the power of anything that would snatch us from his hands.

Amen

Hymn: Surely Goodness, Love and Mercy

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg7K0-Cd4i8>

*Oh Lord, You're my Shepherd
You make me lie in fields of green
You lead me by the still waters
You restore righteousness to me
Though I walk through the valley
I will fear no evil thing
For You are with me
And You comfort me*

*Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go*

*Oh Lord, You're my Shepherd
You make me lie in fields of green
You lead me by the still waters
You restore righteousness to me
Though I walk through the valley
I will fear no evil thing
For You are with me, God
And You comfort me, You comfort me*

Surely goodness, love and mercy

*Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Oh yeah, wherever I go, wherever I go*

*Surely goodness, love and mercy
I'm gonna dwell in the house of the Lord forever
I said I'm gonna dwell in the house of the Lord
forever
Sing it with me one time
I'm gonna dwell in the house of the Lord forever
Yes, I will
I'm gonna dwell in the house of the Lord forever
Wherever I go*

*Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
Surely goodness, love and mercy
Will follow wherever I go
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Inc.*

Reading: John 15 v. 1-16

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

Message:

Over the past few Sundays, I have been sharing with churches the words of the Covenant service and, in particular, the words of the Covenant prayer:

I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

To ‘offer all I have and am to serve you’ is a huge commitment to make. How we feel about it will depend a lot on our perspective. If we approach God from a perspective of insecurity and anxiety, then we may very well see our commitment as one of duty and following orders, like a fearful servant. If we approach God from a perspective of feeling secure within a loving relationship, then we will see things completely differently. We need to ask ourselves whether our perspective needs to change.

Perspective is an important thing and can change quite dramatically. Take, for example, the case of the Post Office Horizon scandal. Years ago, nobody questioned the accuracy of the Horizon accounting system. If a sub-postmaster had less hard cash than the system said there should be, then there was a presumed guilt that they must have been stealing. Then what happened? We discovered that the Horizon software was flawed, very flawed it would seem. Our perspective has changed. Now there is a presumption that anyone convicted on the basis of that flawed evidence must be innocent. We have gone from presumed guilt, to presumed innocence. That’s a huge change of perspective.

Our reading today is one of the readings suggested within the Covenant service. Jesus is drawing lessons from the example of the vine with its branches and fruit. What is your perspective as you read those verses - one of fear or one of confidence?

As I was preparing to preach on this reading, I felt God say to flip it around. The illustration of the vine and what immediately follows it spreads over seventeen verses. Those verses actually fall into two halves. Eight verses give us the illustration of the vine and nine verses follow on from it. And each of these is standalone. That means that they belong together but they also make perfect sense on their own. So, what I felt I was being asked to do today is to flip them round – to read verses 9-17 first and then to let verses 1-8 follow on and to see how our perspective is changed as a result.

Verse 9 - *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

Jesus clearly believes that his words are meant to bring joy rather than despondency. And not just some small measure of joy but a joy that is 'complete'. Jesus is saying that if we are Christians then we exist in a wonderful relationship of love in Jesus that is nothing less than the love that Jesus receives from his father and passes on to us. Jesus promises us that we will remain in that love just as long as we are keeping his commands. So, the obvious question that springs up is 'What is it that Jesus is commanding me to do?'

We read on:

12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

It's as simple as that. Jesus commands us to love other people and to do so using the example that he has set before us. We must love selflessly and self-sacrificially as Jesus has done. Thankfully this isn't rocket science and it isn't rocket science to understand that if someone isn't prepared to love, then that person has nothing in common with Jesus or his Father. God is love. And if someone isn't prepared to love, then there can be no meeting point. But for those of us who are prepared to say yes to Jesus and yes to trying to love as Jesus loved then Jesus goes on to say ...

15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

You are loved. You are chosen. You are a friend and not a servant. You are appointed. And Jesus wants you to go out and bless the world by bearing lasting fruit within it. Does that not fill you with joy and inspiration and a desire to go and bear fruit? Do you not now want to be open to God's working in you, even pruning, to enable you to become more and more fruitful? So now let's reflect upon the picture of the vine and you will hear these words completely differently. We are not desperately striving on our own to stay connected but we are in partnership with Jesus and secure within his love and acceptance. This is our covenant relationship. In him comes the desire to bear fruit. In him comes the power to bear fruit. In him comes the bearing of fruit that will bring glory to God the father.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Jesus says to his earthly disciples that they are clean because of the word he has spoken to them. We might add that, as 21st century disciples, we are also clean because of his death on the cross for us and the forgiveness that has brought us. Our inner critic - that voice inside us that tells us we're not good enough - presumes guilt but Jesus presumes innocence. Indeed, he does more than that. He tells us that we ARE clean and able to enter his Father's presence without fear and trembling. So let the voice of Jesus drown out that little voice within you that would falsely claim otherwise.

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

That's the part that has many of us worried. Will I measure up? Will I be one of those branches that is cut off and burned in the fire? We've already looked at the fact that Jesus declares you clean but let's look at one more thing. Which are the branches that are thrown in the fire? Are they branches that have borne less fruit than expected? No. Are they branches that have only borne a small amount of fruit? No. The branches that the gardener cuts off are those that have borne NO fruit. Do you not find that reassuring? You may sometimes find it difficult to love. You may find some people difficult to love. But as long as you have the desire to love with the

strength that Jesus will give you then that is enough. You will bear fruit and, with the help of God the gardener, will bear more and more fruit as he works to change you from the inside out.

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

One final observation. The bearing of fruit isn't down to us! Jesus makes very clear that it can only be done as we remain in him and draw strength from him. Our responsibility isn't to go it alone but to open ourselves up to him so that his fruit may appear in our lives. This, he adds, will bring glory to God, the Father.

So let us finish where we started, with those words of the Covenant prayer, but hopefully with a changed perspective as we approach them.

I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

Hymn: StF 446 I will offer up my life

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQkzHwz2eLE&t=16s>

*I will offer up my life in spirit and truth
Pouring out the oil of love, as my worship to you
In surrender I must give my every part
Lord, receive this sacrifice of a broken heart
Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring
To so faithful a Friend, to so loving a King?
Saviour, what can be said, what can be sung
As a praise of Your name for the things You have done?
Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part
Of the debt of love that is owed by this thankful heart*

*You deserve my every breath, for You've paid the great cost
Giving up your life to death, even death on the cross
You took all my shame away, there defeated my sin
Open up the gates of heaven and have beckoned me in
Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring
To so faithful a Friend, to so loving a King?
Savior, what can be said, what can be sung
As a praise of Your name for the things You have done?
Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part
Of the debt of love that is owed by this thankful heart*

Matt Redman

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Prayer

Lord God, we do indeed offer up our lives to you – in spirit and in truth – and we pray that you may not just hear and answer our prayers but that you may also use us as an answer to other people's prayers where that is possible.

We pray for all those who are fearful and anxious today, particularly those who are fearful and anxious when they think of you. We pray that you may pour your peace into them and that they may know the security and assurance of being surrounded by your love.

We pray for those who are sick or suffering in other ways, whether that be physically, emotionally or spiritually. May they know your healing hand upon them and the assurance of your presence.

We pray for those who are grieving. May you grant them your peace but also the confidence of knowing that death is defeated and that nothing can separate us from your love and presence on either side of the grave.

We pray for our communities and the work of your Holy Spirit within them, both directly and through working within individuals. We pray that negativity may be driven out by positivity and that the fruit you are growing within people may be more and more evident. Give us a vision for the work you are doing within our communities and how we might join in.

And finally, we pray for the world and for its leaders. We pray for individuals and for situations, as we remember that, through Jesus, your light shines in the darkness of our world and that the darkness will never, ever be able to overcome it.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come;
your 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 who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.

Amen.

Hymn: STF 548 Blessed Assurance

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WQdwkCdXpU>

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine;
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

Refrain:

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.*

*Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
Refrain*

*Perfect submission, all is at rest
I in my Savior am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.*

Refrain