



### Introduction

*The welcome of baptism is for all God's children. This baptismal gift sets us free from the power of sin and death. In today's gospel, Christ promises that the disciple who gives a cup of cold water to the little ones serves Christ himself. From worship we are sent on our baptismal mission: to serve the little ones of this world and to be a sign of God's merciful welcome.*

### Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity one God, Father, ✚ Son, and Holy Spirit,  
whose steadfast love is everlasting,  
whose faithfulness endures from generation to generation. **Amen.**

Trusting in the mercy of God, let us confess our sin.

*Silence is kept for reflection.*

Reconciling God,

**we confess that we do not trust your abundance,  
and we deny your presence in our lives.**

**We place our hope in ourselves and rely on our own efforts.**

**We fail to believe that you provide enough for all.**

**We abuse your good creation for our own benefit.**

**We fear difference and do not welcome others as you have welcomed us.**

**We sin in thought, word, and deed.**

**By your grace, forgive us; through your love, renew us;  
and in your Spirit, lead us;**

**so that we may live and serve you in newness of life. Amen.**

Beloved of God,

by the radical abundance of divine mercy

we have peace with God through ✚ Christ Jesus,

through whom we have obtained grace upon grace.

Our sins are forgiven. Let us live now in hope.

For hope does not disappoint,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

### Gathering Hymn

*This is My Father's World*

*Listen and sing along [here](#).*

## Prayer of the Day

O God, you direct our lives by your grace, and your words of justice and mercy reshape the world. Mold us into a people who welcome your word and serve one another, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

## Psalm: Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

- <sup>1</sup>Your love, O LORD, forever will I sing;  
from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.
- <sup>2</sup>**For I am persuaded that your steadfast love is established forever;  
you have set your faithfulness firmly in the heavens.**
- <sup>3</sup>“I have made a covenant with my chosen one;  
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:
- <sup>4</sup>**I will establish your line forever,  
and preserve your throne for all generations.’ ”**
- <sup>15</sup>Happy are the people who know the festal shout!  
They walk, O LORD, in the light of your presence.
- <sup>16</sup>**They rejoice daily in your name;  
they are jubilant in your righteousness.**
- <sup>17</sup>For you are the glory of their strength,  
and by your favor our might is exalted.
- <sup>18</sup>**Truly, our shield belongs to the LORD;  
our king to the Holy One of Israel.**

## Second Reading: Romans 6:12-23

*Sin is an enslaving power which motivates us to live self-serving, disobedient lives. Sin's final payoff is death. We, however, have been set free from sin's slavery to live obediently under God's grace, whose end is the free gift of eternal life.*

*Read the text [here](#).*

## Gospel: Matthew 10: 40-42

*When Jesus sends his disciples out as missionaries, he warns them of persecution and hardships they will face. He also promises to reward any who aid his followers and support their ministry.*

*Read the text [here](#).*

## Reflection on the Text

Our second lesson today from Romans is a continuation of the passage from last week. It is some of St. Paul's most powerful writing, packed with contrasting images of death and life, law and grace, sin and obedience, slavery and freedom.

Martin Luther, writing about this passage, challenges us to resist sin, while he points out that sin has no dominion over us unless we want it to. He encourages us to live humbly, obediently – and even tells us that we can do it easily!

The reason is that we do not live under the burden of the law, but in the freedom of grace. That freedom provides us the ability to serve others – willingly - in love, rather than begrudgingly under the law. (LW 25:53)

There is very little I have read lately that seems to apply any more directly to our current circumstances than this. The world seems to be spinning out of control, doesn't it? Climate change, wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes seem to follow one another like rush hour traffic on a busy highway.

Add to those disasters generations of sinful treatment of others: gender-based harassment, abuse, and violence; ethnic cleansing of native people in events like the Trail of Tears and of Jews in the Holocaust; to say nothing of ongoing racial prejudice and injustice. It seems that people have no lack of imagination about ways to hurt others.

And as icing on the cake, add on a global pandemic to add fear for everyone, sickness for many, and death for hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

I sometimes find myself echoing the words that are familiar to us from the season of Advent: "Come, Lord Jesus!" because only the return of the Messiah to rule the world can possibly set everything right again.

But in the meantime, until Christ returns, we have one very powerful tool available. I am not talking about worry, fear, anger, despair, or hatred. As St. Paul writes, we are not meant to be slaves to sin. We have been set free from sin through the power of God's grace to LOVE one another.

There is an old story, attributed to a wise rabbi, which has often been told, but it bears repeating in this time, as a reminder that love is what unites us all, when so many things threaten to divide us...

*One day a man said to God, "God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like."*

*God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man's mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished.*

*They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.*

*The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, "You have seen Hell."*

*Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same.*

*There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the man's mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.*

*The man said, "I don't understand."*

*God smiled. It is simple, he said, Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another, while the greedy only think of themselves...*

"Sometimes, thinking solely of our [own desires], we forget our interdependence with everyone and everything around us, so much so that we stop caring about them in our pursuit of what we want."

"But, as this parable makes it clear, by doing so not only do we not help others overcome their suffering; we are also unconsciously harming ourselves, since we are all connected on a very deep level."

It is time for us – all of us - to put aside our apparent differences of gender or language or religion or skin color. To quit looking for things that divide us, and to realize that we are all united in our humanity.

I am certain that none of us wants to live in a hell of self-centered sinfulness that blinds us to the possibilities of experiencing joy because we were unwilling to help one another.

It is time to realize that the threat to our safety in this time is the virus - not the rules or the masks or the physical distancing - but the virus itself and even more, the slavery that our sinful selfishness creates.

It is time to remember what suffering Jesus endured for all of us – and for the whole creation. To remember what Paul taught the Christians in Rome and Luther taught Christians in the days of the Black Plague. To learn that the most God-like, most loving thing we can do is to live like the people in the rabbi's depiction of heaven, who learned how to look out for one another, to share, and to thrive in spite of what could have been great adversity.

That, my friends, is how we will come to experience the free gift of God, which is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

## Special Music

*My Jesus, I Love Thee*

Listen [here](#).

## Apostles' Creed

*We profess our faith with the whole church in all times and places:*

**I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.**

**who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

## Prayers of Intercession

Called into unity with one another and the whole creation, let us pray for our shared world.

*A brief silence.*

God of companionship, encourage our relationships with our siblings in Christ. Bless our conversations. Shape our shared future and give us hearts eager to join in a festal shout of praise. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of abundance, you make your creation thrive and grow to provide all that we need. Inspire us to care for our environment and be attuned to where the earth is crying out. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of mercy, your grace is poured out for all. Inspire authorities, judges, and politicians to act with compassion. Teach us to overcome fear with hope, meet hate with love, and welcome one another as we would welcome you. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of care, accompany all who are in deepest need. Comfort those who are sick, lonely, or abandoned, especially those we name now. Strengthen those who are in prison or awaiting trial. Renew the spirits of all who call upon you. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of community, we give thanks for this congregation. Give us passion to embrace your mission and the vision to recognize where you are leading us. Teach us how to live more faithfully with each other. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

God of love, you gather in your embrace all who have died. Keep us steadfast in our faith and renew our trust in your promise. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Receive these prayers, O God, and those too deep for words; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**Our Father, who art 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 who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

### **Closing Hymn**

*Amazing Grace*

*Listen and sing along [here](#).*

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Today's reflection was written by Pastor Ruth Ann Sipe.

The *Parable of the Long Spoons* can be found many places, including:

<https://theunboundedspirit.com/heaven-and-hell-the-parable-of-the-long-spoons/>

Special music by Judy Shelton.