

Blessed and One in Christ 2024
Isaiah 25:6-8 Ephesians 2:1-2, 12-13, 19-22

Isaiah 25:6-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Ephesians 2:1-2, 12-13, 19-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

This passage from Isaiah is one of my favorite **promises from God**,
and not so much a **feast of rich food** or **well-aged wines strained clear**,
but that wonderful poetic picture of all humanity
gathered from East and West, from North and South,
with death swallowed up forever
and tears lovingly wiped from all faces.

Think about that and try to imagine that beautiful scene,
of Isaiah's vision of God's kingdom as a banquet table feast,
where all are invited by grace and all are welcome to partake,
which is the Good News & assurance we need to hear today vs. 6~8

On this mountain the **LORD** of hosts will make for **all peoples** a feast of rich food, ... Then the Lord **GOD** will wipe away the tears from **all faces**, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from **all the earth**, **for the LORD has spoken**.

This Isaiah passage provides a glimpse of the promised Kingdom of God
which Jesus came to initiate and put into process
toward the fulfilment of God's promises & purpose,
as explained in Ephesians the passage, vs. 1, 12-13, 19-20,

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ... having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In the abstract and as a theological ideal, that seems easy enough.
But unity does not mean uniformity, and does not deny or obliterate
our distinctions, our differences and variances,
but celebrates our uniqueness as God's gift toward mission,

bound together and connected because, **Jesus is our Lord.**

And this wasn't something that the early church leaders had planned,
but it was entirely the work, the blessing, intent & purpose of God
reforming the followers of Jesus into the body of Christ, vs. 21-22,

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The original Greek is quite specific here --- the "you"
is plural and does not refer to an individual Christian.

The "you" refers to the whole community of faith, the Church,
to all who gather together in Christ and become a dwelling place for God.

Yes, of course we each one have an individual relationship with God,
but a living and growing Christian faith involves community,
and to be Christian, is to be a part of Christ's body...

**... for God uses diversity to strengthen and to increase our faith,
and Christian spirituality necessarily involves other people.
It means learning to work with others, and learning to love them.**

Indeed it is through our unity despite diversity and differences,
that the Kingdom of God is most boldly and vividly revealed,
where **all** are considered worthy, welcome and invited.

In Jesus Christ, by grace we become and are becoming new creatures.
Not defined by our race, culture, status, income or anything else
other than by grace and faith, by our shared unity in Christ ...
... for by grace, we are all the beloved children of God...

...in a relationship of grace, peace, promise, purpose, service & hope,
a relational well-being, wholeness and meaningful usefulness,
of living together in harmony as God intends for humanity,
not by our efforts, but comes as a **gift accomplished for us by Jesus.**

* So even if our every opinion and our understanding of the Bible
were entirely correct and in perfect agreement with God's truth,
we are still healed and saved **only by God's grace alone.**

* And even if we have it all completely wrong in every way, and our
understanding of Scripture is totally flawed and erroneous,
we are still healed and saved **only by God's grace alone.**

Christian discipleship according to God's will, desire and purpose
means that we learn to live together **with our differences,**
to love and respect even those with whom we disagree.

Welcome and hospitality are not just an option for us as Christians,
but are the faithful path that Jesus has called us to walk,
not as a guilt driven commandment or legalism,
but as an obedient response to God's own grace.

These verses from Ephesians are about transforming & healing power,
when through the Holy Spirit, God's mercy and love enters our life
through Christ, becoming the person God designed & calls us to be.

It's a living trust and certainty of God's infinite love and grace
which can reset & transform our whole outlook & direction in life.

It's not that God removes us from the floodwaters or fiery flames
but that the Lord **never** gives up on us, or abandons, or rejects us.
God's gracious desire is to heal and to bless, to restore and to save,
and what an incredible truth and promise to fully trust and know
that even our worst and most horrible **cannot defeat God's love.**

**The Lord brings comfort, and healing, and blessing to his people,
bringing us up from the grave of worry and despair**
because we are his and because our God truly loves,
because God's love is steadfast, powerful and always faithful,
and upon that certain truth we can rest & rely through any storm.

Whatever circumstance we face in life, whatever happens in our life
God will never abandon us to defeat, **for God isn't done yet,**
and there are more new beginnings and healings yet to come.

God's invitation, God's love, it's broad, powerful and expansive.
The vision and the promise is that all are equally & uniquely loved
and all are made worthy and acceptable by our Savior's sacrifice,
**for we are each, in the continuing transformation process,
by grace reshaped, made members of the one body of Christ.**

In 1933, the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg
was concerned about the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany.
He felt the impending threat of another terrible world war,
and the Christian Church needed to speak a message of unity.

So he urged Christian churches around the globe, **as a sign of unity**
to all celebrate Communion on the 1st Sunday in October,
as a sign and symbol of Christian unity.

World Communion Sunday, which is intended to recognize our unity,
is still celebrated each year by Christian churches worldwide,
reminding us that we are all truly one in Jesus Christ,
bound together & connected because, Jesus is our Lord.

This has become one of my favorite worship services of the year,
as an annual reminder, a meaningful & blessed reminder
that we are part of something much larger than just us,
where all are appreciated & considered worthy, welcome & invited,
because God's love, grace & Holy Spirit are directing our lives.

I am inspired by World Communion Sunday at 1st Presbyterian Church,
for in a world and season of distrust, division and hostility,
here we celebrate our diversity, our uniqueness & differences.

It is a most significant and important symbol of God's work among us,
as we honor and celebrate the unity we share as followers of Christ
that's become increasingly rich and meaningful over the years.

At first, when our youth processed into worship carrying flags,
the different flags represented countries around the world
where we supported missionaries and Bible translators...

... and so we celebrated those connections we had around the world.

When several university students & their families from Cameroon became such a faithful & beloved part of our lives and church family it was that year that the flag of Cameroon was added in celebration of those wonderful new relationships.

And what a joy it was to see their surprised faces and smiles when they first saw their own flag in our worship procession.

For us, these flags represent more than just nations of the world. They are in celebration of the relationships we share, and represent far more than just a distant map location...

... they are symbols of people, our family we've grown to know and love.

I treasure the way our lives have intersected, which so greatly enriches the meaning and significance of World Communion, as we are reminded that we are but **one small piece of the whole Church of Jesus Christ- of all believers.**

Surely God has poured out grace & blessings on us, and on this church.

Faithfulness begins by living lives well right where we are, so that our lives are worthy of the grace we have received...

... for our God **is so awesome**, and the breadth of his love **is so broad**, that he stoops down to our feeble human traits & particularities.

Holy God accepts and welcomes us all into worship, **whoever we are**, whether the language of worship is Korean, Igbo, Spanish or English, for we are all one in Jesus Christ, of the one body, and unified in our call to proclaim the Gospel. **That is our true mission, which celebrates our uniqueness as God's gift toward mission.**

That also means that our diverse and unique gifts of God's grace are not just for our own pleasure or sense of satisfaction, but are actually God's gifts **to the community of faith intended to flow unimpeded and creatively through us.**

Christ has set us all free to participate in God's grace & mission, for it is when we live those values of unity and love faithfully, that we are able to live together in harmony as a community, breaking down the walls that separate the children of God, for we live in a world desperate for a word of gentle grace and hope.

Our friends, families, our community, our nation and our world, we are living amid uncertainty, discouragement, fear and upheaval, and none of us know exactly what the future before us will bring.

Current news makes it frightfully clear that these are perilous times of polarizing hatred, injustice, violence and the threat of war, unimaginable hostility, corruption and bitter divisiveness. **We live in a world desperate for a word of gentle grace & hope.**

Therefore the chief business, the mission and purpose of the Church - **for this church** to reflect & share with others, the Gospel, & to be

a visible & living representation of Christ to this world.

**It is that same truth we celebrate today, World Communion Sunday,
a very special worship service at First Presbyterian Church today,
as we all come together today with each one contributing,
to praise & celebrate this unity we share in Jesus Christ.**

Clearly, God has been up to something powerful & wonderful among us.

It is not that somehow we have figured all this out ourselves,
but that the Lord God chose to bless this church abundantly,
and that working together, somehow we have managed
to set our sails to catch the wind of the Holy Spirit,

**so let us come to the Lord's Table with gratitude and joy,
and let us truly be one, the called & blessed body of Christ.**