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OMC

From Earning to Receiving:

Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9

Good Morning Everyone,

I want to start by drawing your attention to your bulletins, particularly to our focus statement for this morning. For our third Sunday of Lent, our theme is ‘from earning to receiving,’ and our focus statement reads as follows:

**As we seek God’s way,
we move from believing that we must earn
our nourishment, our privileges, even our identity as God’s children,
to an understanding that abundant life is a gift.**

Our Isaiah text bolsters this sentiment, giving us a beautiful scene of God’s blessings, generously offered, without limit. An abundant God who pours forth love without price. A nurturing creator who is constantly bestowing on us the grace and gentleness that we neglect to offer ourselves. Our morning’s songs have continued to invite us into a posture of receiving God’s love. It’s a humbling thing, to receive a gift that we know we did not earn, that we cannot earn. To recognize the pure generosity from another, being offered up to us. Particularly when everything in our surrounding society rewards striving, earning, winning. Hymn #9 which we sang together names it perfectly

**Come away from rush and hurry to the stillness of God’s peace;
from our vain ambition’s worry, come to Christ to find release.
Come Away from noise and clamour, life’s demands and frenzied pace;
come to join the people gathered here to seek and find God’s grace.
In the pastures of God’s goodness, we lie down to rest our soul,
from the waters of God’s mercy, we drink deeply, are made whole.**

All of the liturgy and music that frames this morning’s service is this incredible embrace of acceptance and warmth. In the heaviness of lent, and the weariness of the two-year mark of our church’s response to the pandemic, we receive these words of God’s unconditional love. Then our liturgy throws us Luke 13. In this warm hug of a service, we are tossed into the jarring, violent imagery that Jesus pulls into the Biblical context. It felt so out of place when I first read it, I assumed I had the wrong scripture.

The first section is full of scorn. First the scorn of the people coming to complain about their sacrifices getting muddled with the blood of *those other* Galilean sacrifices. Then its Jesus' scorn. Jesus is so angry at these people trying to separate themselves out from those they deem more sinful he escalates the conversation dramatically: "You think your so perfect, think of the random deaths your neighbours just endured, do you think you're any more ready to meet your maker?" It is a shockingly blunt, making it clear that Jesus will have nothing to do with the comparison politics around so called 'holiness.'

I suppose you could argue that Jesus is also making the point from our focus statement, that we are not earning God's love. But I have to say I much preferred our lovely Isaiah passage to these snappy verses. I was left with a bad taste in my mouth when reading the line "**you'll all come to the same end unless you change your ways.**" It felt like condemnation, a statement that I am not a good enough Christian and need to be better in order to deserve God's love. But of course, that's the opposite of today's lesson. So, what was this passage doing here?

Four times this morning we have gone over a particular phrase from Isaiah, in our call to worship, scripture reading, reading of response, and prayer of confession. We have declared the words "**your ways are not our ways**". In the Isaiah scripture we have many verses on God's unconditional love and mercy, and then it says "**let the corrupt abandon their ways, the evil their thoughts... I will have mercy on them... I will freely pardon them, for my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways.**" God tells us that all we have to do is receive God's love. No earning, no striving. Mercy is freely offered to us and love continually surrounds us. There is no price. The above verses make it clear that this is for everyone, for all.

This mercy extends to not only us, but those we deem corrupt, who have done evil. They receive pardon, because **my ways are not your ways**. Perhaps Jesus isn't telling us we need to work harder to earn God's love when he demands we change our ways.

Maybe instead, as his anger cools, he is highlighting the second phase of Isaiah's message. We are to receive God's love and forgiveness as a blessing, **and** we are to **change our ways** to follow the example God gives to us. We need to stop mandating that those around us must earn our love or forgiveness. In her new book, Brene Brown talks about the emotion resentment, saying that she used to think resentment was a form of anger at those not living up to a certain standard; but that's not where resentment comes from. Resentment is a form of envy. It is an emotion we experience when we fail to set up boundaries or ask for what we need in order that our own needs can be met.

The thought in our mind when resentment arises appears as a criticism. "They should be making better choices," but beneath that the truer sentiment is "I'm not mad because you're flawed; I'm envious because I desperately need to be accepted and loved, but I can't believe I can receive this if I'm less than perfect." It's the people grumbling at their sacrifices who are getting mixed up with those who haven't followed all the same pious rules as they have because, if they can't believe God loves them for who they are, how can they extend that love to anyone else? Jesus declares that we have to stop demanding everyone live up to these high expectations, including ourselves. There is no good end in that way of living. That is not God's way.

Jesus then retells an ancient wisdom story of the Ahikar tradition, the original tale tells the story of a tree which fails to produce a harvest. One day, the owner of the tree came to cut it down, but the tree said, "Leave me in this place, that in the next year I may bear fruit." The owner of the tree said, "Up to this day hast thou been to me useless, in the future thou wilt not become useful" and cuts down the tree.

You'll notice Jesus alters this story. Instead of one season, the tree has been useless for three years, making it even more reasonable to cut down the tree, so the owner approaches to cut it down. But the vine dresser intervenes, "**Please, leave it one more year while I hoe around it and fertilize it.**" Of course, this vine dresser is showing us the merciful and hope-filled nature of God. It is also an example of the way we are to act.

To give people the time and space to grow. To nurture and care for one another regardless of the usefulness they have contributed so far. To forgive one another when we fail.

We are coming off of an emotionally exhausting couple years, and we have been changed because of it. The mental health toll is extensive, the division in our communities continue to deepen, and our world faces international emergencies. We have continually re-evaluated how best to love our neighbours, to follow Jesus' example to care for the most vulnerable among us. We've had to make many hard choices with only the information we had at the time, knowing that we were making mistakes along the way. I keep hearing the phrase 'we are going to have to learn to live with COVID,' but I'm not sure that is the real work of the next few months and years. I think we have to learn how to live with each other once more.

The challenge for us as people of the church is learning how to heal our relationships, our communities. Mennonite Pastor Carrie Lehn invites us to consider how to transition into The Great Forgiveness. How do we offer our neighbours, our fellow church members, gentleness and grace as we stumble out of the last two years, tired and bruised and uncertain? How do we make sure that we hold enough space in our communities for all to receive unconditional love and restoration?

Our closing hymn this morning follows the same pattern as our scripture text. We start by taking a moment for restoration, we accept this gift of Gods love. We receive this blessing, and we accept forgiveness for the harms we have done, not as a condition of God's love but as a natural response to it. We experience God's gentleness and grace. Then we turn to the final verse, a nudge after the nurturing, an invitation to walk in God's ways, and love as God loves. Our own needs met by Gods unconditional love, we turn to meet each other with this same grace.

Benediction: (*Lenten Leader Resource*)

From this time and place into whatever awaits,
may you follow God's way of receiving.
May you let go of your feelings of unworthiness
and accept God's abundant gifts.
As you go, know that our God of the wilderness
remains with you on the way.
Amen.