

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 16, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION

Sorrow looks back.
Worry looks around.
Faith looks up.

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Today is the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.
During this season, during which our Paraments are green –
the color of growth –
we seek to grow in grace – and in love – for all of God's children.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Our Call to Worship is adapted from the 67th Psalm.

Leader: May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his face to shine upon us, that God's way may be known upon earth, his saving power among all nations.

People: **Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.**

Leader: Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity, and guide the nations upon earth.

People: **Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.**

Leader: The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

People: **May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Most gracious God, how good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. Draw us now into the community you intend for all people. Keep us from being misled by popular acclaim, or the false witness of the marketplace. May we not be unobservant guides to one another, but – rather – may we be fully open to your gifts and obedient to your call. Come among us now with healing and blessing, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Great God of many blessings,
whose gifts to us are more numerous than we can count:
Speak to us this day through the reading and hearing of your Word,
that we might use these blessings according to your will and purpose,
that opportunities may be opened to all your children,
and that unity may become a reality among us.
And – through our mutual caring –
may we know a foretaste of the eternal for which Christ gave himself.
Amen.

FIRST READING:

Isaiah 56:1-2, 6-8

Our first Scripture Reading comes from the Prophet Isaiah – selected verses from Chapter 56. This chapter is part of the third portion of Isaiah's prophecy, and deals with – and describes – the future in the realm of God....

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.
Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.
And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

SECOND READING:

Matthew 15:21-28

*As we continue in Year A of the Lectionary Cycle,
our Second Scripture Reading again comes from Matthew's Gospel.
Earlier in Chapter 15,
Jesus has been engaged in a contentious conversation with the Pharisees –
who had come out of Jerusalem to challenge him....*

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.
Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting,
"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is tormented by a demon."
But he did not answer her at all.
And his disciples came and urged him,
saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."
He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."
He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."
She said, "Yes, Lord,
yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."
Then Jesus answered her,
"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."
And her daughter was healed from that moment.

SERMON

"Learning to Lean"

The story is told of a famous monastery in Greece.

It is perched high – on the top of a sheer, three-hundred-foot cliff.

And – so – the Abbey can only be reached by a terrifying ride,
in a swaying basket.

The basket is pulled up – with a single rope – by several strong men,
perspiring under the strain of the heavy load.

Halfway up the cliff, one **American** tourist got nervous.

He had noticed that the rope seemed very old – and frayed.

So – he asked, "*How often do you change the rope?*"

The monk who was in charge smiled.

And, he replied, "*Whenever it breaks!*"

In a similar way, our eternal fulfillment is a matter of faith –
not faith as we might define it,
but faith as defined by Jesus.

Such means trust –
innocent, open, unbreakable trust in Almighty God –
who is the Creator – and Giver – of all life.

It means an unbreakable trust in God's promise:
that is, never to withdraw his everlasting, eternal,
and personal love for each one of us.

It means an unfailing trust in God's claim of victory over death.

It means an unassailable trust in the redeeming power of love –
as God has revealed it in Jesus Christ.

And, such trust is illustrated by the remarkable trust of a woman –
the woman in today's reading from **Matthew's Gospel**.

As Matthew relates, a **Canaanite woman** suddenly appears.

[Remember, the **district of Tyre and Sidon** is **Gentile territory** –
to the northwest of **Galilee**.]

And, she cries out to Jesus for help:

***"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is tormented by a demon."***

At first, Jesus ignores her plea.

And – because she is also bothering them –
Jesus' disciples urge him to send her away.

Indeed – for his part – Jesus seems to agree.

He reminds her of the purpose of his ministry:

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

Now, here – to understand Jesus' reaction –
some background from the **Hebrew Scriptures** – the **Old Testament** –
is essential!

Specifically, we need to take note of **Deuteronomy 7:1-2**:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land
that you are about to enter and occupy,
and he clears away many nations before you –
the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites,
the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites,
seven nations mightier and more numerous than you –
and when the LORD your God gives them over to you
and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them.
Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

So, the **Law of Moses** states that the **Canaanites** are to be *shown no mercy* –
the very thing that the Canaanite woman has asked of Jesus!

But, the woman persists!

She kneels down – and she pleads – “*Lord, help me.*”

And – ultimately – Jesus recognizes the woman’s faith,
and her daughter is – then – healed instantly!

So, what – then – has happened?

Was Jesus merely bested in an argument by this Canaanite woman – this “dog” –
thus presenting us with an early triumph for feminism?

Or, does Jesus – afflicted by doubt –
change his mind – and learn more –
about the focus of his mission and ministry?

Now – when we stop to think about it –
Jesus’ changing his mind would not be so unusual in and of itself.

After all, Jesus is the **Son of God** –
God’s presence with us on earth –
Emmanuel, God with us.

And – throughout Scripture –
God has been shown to sometimes change his mind.

We see it in **Genesis** –
in Abraham’s bargaining with God –
over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We see it in the **story of the exodus** – following the **Golden Calf** incident.

There – in the face of **Moses’ pleas** –
God changes his mind about wiping out Israel,
and then starting over again – with just Moses.

And, we see it in the book of the **prophet Jonah**:

When faced with **Nineveh's** unabashed repentance,
God changes his mind about destroying that city.

And **Nineveh** – it can be said –
represented the *“mother of all dogs”!*

It was the **capital city of Assyria** – Israel's deadliest enemy –
the nation which had destroyed Jerusalem,
and carried Israel off, into exile.

So – if the situation called for it –
why wouldn't Jesus change his mind?

After all, he would only be following the precedent set by his Father.

He – too – would be moving from judgment to grace –
and from withholding mercy –
to extending it most liberally?

But – even with this reality in mind –
we may also profitably examine Jesus' actions
from the point of view of **Christian doctrine**.

That is, our traditional understanding is that **Jesus the Christ** had –
and continues to have –
two distinct natures:

First, a fully-present, divine nature –
an indwelling of God's being, so full – and so perfect –
that it can truly be said that Jesus –
when he walked the earth –
was truly God-with-us in every sense of the term.

And second, a full – and perfect – human nature;
human in every way that we are human,
with the only exception being that he did not sin.

In the beginning of our reading – then –
we get a glimpse of Jesus in all his humanity:

He is confronted by an obvious foreigner – an outsider –
one well beyond the reach of his mission and ministry.

And, his first reaction is to ignore her.

Yet it is also a part of his humanity to wait – to hesitate –
to stop – and think things over.

It is part of his humanity – in the face of crying human need –
to allow his compassion to be aroused.

And, it is part of his – and our – humanity, to shift focus,
to be moved – and spurred into action – by grace and mercy.

It is at this point – then – that **Jesus' Divinity** comes to the fore:

Having witnessed the Canaanite woman's faith,
the steadfast love and faithfulness of God comes to the fore.

And, it does so with Divine, creative, power:

The woman's daughter is healed instantly!

And, a most basic, Scriptural principle, is affirmed:

We are saved by faith, wherever it may be found:
Inside the community, or outside of it...
Among friends, or among those who have been – previously –
considered to be enemies, or outsiders.

Indeed, this whole scene anticipates the time to come:
the time when there will no longer be any division –
between Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free –
the time when it is plain that – in God's Eternal Plan –
salvation is graciously offered to all.

And, the fact is that – in the meantime –
Christianity cannot be contained, or confined, or isolated.

By the power of the **Holy Spirit**,
Christianity spontaneously spreads – out into the world.

And, as a result, eternal fulfillment –
under the **Rule of God** – is available to all.

To her credit, the woman – in our reading from Matthew – believed that.

She – then – said “No!”

“No!” to the notion that she – and her daughter –
were less valuable,
less precious in God’s eyes,
than the people in the House of Israel –
or anybody else.

And so – as the story ends – Jesus says to her,
“*Woman, you have great faith!*
Let it be done for you as you wish.”

It is worth noting that – while faith is always rewarded –
sometimes that reward comes in a way that only God knows is best.

Marlene Bagnall –
the author of hundreds of inspirational articles, and poems –
has written a moving account of how her faith in God’s goodness
carried her through an extremely difficult life experience:

She wrote,
“My mother has a dementing illness – similar to Alzheimer’s.

“For the past two years,
I have watched her lose more and more of her mind.

"Every day, she sees people who aren't there,
and hears voices that aren't speaking.

"Listening to her ravings is the most difficult – and painful –
thing I've ever experienced.

"Why, God?" I've wept.

"Why can't you give her back her mind?
Why are You allowing her to suffer like this?"

"But – slowly – I've begun to see God's goodness, even in this.

"I've begun to see that my mother really isn't suffering.

"Because her mind is failing,
she doesn't realize she's getting worse.

"She doesn't remember who I am,
but she also doesn't remember people who have hurt her in the past.

"And – even though she gets irritated by the imaginary people she sees –
because of them she doesn't feel alone.

"Day-by-day, moment-by-moment,
God is helping me to accept her as she is.

"[God] is helping me to listen to her – and not argue with her.

"Above all, [God] is teaching me that I still can sing
of his power and mercy.

"I feel the transforming power of his Love undergirding me.

"And I know that – in his mercy –
he will call my mother home when the time has come.

"And so I pray, 'Help me, God,
and grant me the faith I need to see your hidden blessings
and keep on singing.'"

The challenging reality is that our **Christian faith**
does not exempt us from pain and suffering.

The fact is that we live in a fallen world –
one in which there is no immunity from evil – and its consequences.

Rather, our **Christian faith** provides us with the spiritual equilibrium –
and the moral stamina –
we need to face up to the burdens,
and the evils, and the fears that confront us.

Last week, I watched an old – **D. James Kennedy** – sermon on faith.

During it, Dr. Kennedy described **three levels of faith**:
Simple faith, mature faith, and perfect faith.

Simple faith knows that God is able, and asks God to – hopefully –
act on the believer's behalf in the face of some situation – or adversity.

Mature faith is confident that God is both able, and will act in that circumstance.

Perfect faith looks beyond any request to God,
and sees that petition as already fulfilled.

And so, with the eyes of faith – and only with the eyes of faith –
can we see clearly that the Father's Plan –
for our lives, and for our final destiny –
has already been fashioned –
out of his infinite love for us.

With the eyes of faith, we can clearly "see things as they are"
in the transforming light of "things as they will be."

And – perhaps most importantly –
the eyes of faith enable us to see
both *our own responsibility* for things as they are,
and *our own role* in bringing forth things as they will be.

The story is told of a missionary –
who went to a far-off land
to preach – and teach – the Good News of the Gospel.

And – there – he began the difficult task
of translating the New Testament into the language of the natives.

But – very soon – a problem arose,
concerning the word *“faith.”*

The native vocabulary included *no single word* for it.

Then one day – while grappling with this problem –
the missionary sank into his favorite chair.

And – he thought to himself –
*“How wonderful it feels to lean your whole weight on something
when you are exhausted.”*

And – suddenly –
he realized that this was the image that he had been searching for.

Thereafter – whenever he came to the words that spoke of faith –
he used the phrase,
“Lean your whole weight on God.”

As you may recall,
the lyrics from **Bill Withers 1972** hit song – *“Lean on Me”* –
call forth this imagery beautifully:

You just call on me brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

Friends, when we lean our whole weight on the Lord,
we simultaneously open ourselves to others;
so that they too may – in turn – lean on us.

And so it is that – this morning –
Jesus is saying to each one of us, “*Lean on Me!*”

Lean on Me,
and experience the transforming power – of my love.

Lean on Me,
and enter into a new life of fellowship –
with Me, and with your brothers and sisters, everywhere.

Friends, we all need somebody to lean on!

And, that Somebody is Jesus Christ!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

Amen.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (*Please join responsively*)

Adapted from the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

One: Why is the Son of God called *Jesus*, which means *Savior*?

All: Because he saves us from our sins, and because salvation is to be sought or found in no other.

One: Why is he called *Christ*, that is, the *Anointed One*?

All: Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be *our chief Prophet and Teacher*, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be *our only High Priest*, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be *our eternal King*, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

One: And why are you called a Christian?

All: Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a good conscience throughout this life, and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creation. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (*Unison*)

Great God of many blessings, whose gifts to us are more numerous than we can count, show us how to use these blessings according to your will and purpose, that options may be opened for all your children, and that unity may become a reality among us. May we know a taste of eternal life in the quality of our mutual caring, and through our sharing with a needy world. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

There is a wonderful song by John Stallings;
Mimi and I learned the chorus years ago –
while we were stationed in Illinois:

I'm learning to lean, learning to lean,
Learning to lean on Jesus.
Finding more power than I'd ever dreamed,
I'm learning to lean on Jesus.

May that be our song – today, and every day!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....

BENEDICTION RESPONSE "God Be with You"

God be with you till we meet again; May your heart be ever learning,
As, to follow Christ, you're yearning: God be with you till we meet again.

