



## 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

### **Worship Resources**

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#### **4. Fourth Sunday in Lent: Sunday March 14, 2010**

##### **Resources for Today**

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##### **Focus for Today**

The worship materials in this year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity are prepared with an eye toward increasing the sense of mutually supportive, loving, just and peaceful communities. Of course, these materials focus on increasing the shared mission and mutual support of the churches. But insofar as the mission of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is to be a movement for whole in a fragmented world, these materials point beyond the church to the larger world.

We are now in the heart of the Lent. Repentance is one of the foundational foci of this season. The theme of repentance is prominent in the gospel reading for today: The parable of the prodigal and elder heirs, found in Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32. This theme can organize the worship materials and preaching for the day.

Because these materials focus on community, it is appropriate that the service of worship help the congregation repent of ways in which the congregation and the culture have not cooperated with God's purposes for community.

In the Christian tradition, repentance is a positive and dynamic action. Of course, it refers to turning away from attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that deny God's purposes. To repent is to give up those things that work against community. Repentance also includes turning towards

God's purpose. To repent is to act **for** the kind of community that God wants in the church and among all peoples.

[Material marked with an asterisk was developed by Linda McKiernan-Allen and Ron Allen]

### **Call to Worship\***

Leader: God created human beings for true community with one another:  
living in peace, justice, abundance, and mutual support.

People: Yet in Genesis, as the first humans left the garden of Eden,  
they squandered the community they had with one another.

Leader: Cain murdered Abel, leading the first human family into the far country of jealousy.  
Torn by suspicion, they separated into competing groups, animosity, and violence.

People: Today, we continue to be prodigal. Humans continue to be jealous, suspicious, arrogant,  
and violent.

Leader: In this Lenten season God call us to come to ourselves.

We repent of the ways we turn away from God's vision for true community.

People: We come to repent. As we worship, we open ourselves to God's renewing spirit.  
and commit ourselves to live together in true community with one another  
and with the world.

### **Opening Prayer\***

God of true community, you open your arms to welcome prodigals. You stand patiently in the field with those reluctant to embrace prodigal sisters and brothers. In this sacred hour, help us realize we are secure in your house, embraced by your unconditional and unending love, and able to repent. Help us come to ourselves, turning away from our disregard of others, turning toward the great belonging you desire for all.

### **Significant Quote**

Peter Ainslie (1867-1934) was not only a significant leader in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) but is considered one of the formative spirits of the contemporary ecumenical movement. While the following quote does not speak directly about the gospel reading for today, it does center in the motif of family which is central to the parable of the parent and the two heirs. Although we cite the text in its gender-specific original language, today's reader would want to render the spirit of the text in inclusive language. Moreover, many interpreters today would give more emphasis to diversity than does Ainslie. Nevertheless, this leader calls attention to the importance of respectful and mutually supportive community. This quote particularly speaks to the elder siblings of the world.

“All peoples have one common ancestor and the stamp of brotherhood is on the countenance, although countenances differ; it is in the speech, although speeches are diverse . . . *Distance and unlikeness do not alter the case [that all people come from a common parent]* any more than the distance between the sunrise and the sunset would exclude one of them from the part of the day, or the difference between the bloom of the dahlia and the bloom of the buttercup would exclude

one of them from the family of flowers. *No, we are all one.* Some may speak with another language, others may dress in different costumes, and still others may be occupants of the dark dens of sin, but all these are my brothers and I am brother to them, for God is the Former of the body, the Father of the soul, and the Father of the nations, and, in all hearts, he has implanted brotherliness that all might give themselves both to mutual affection and to mutual service. The failure of one does not exonerate another. *Whatever my brother does, I still must be brother to him.* We have the same natures; we are fellow men of the same family; we are parts of the same household.” [Peter Ainslie, *My Brother and I: A Brief Manual of the Principles that Make for a Wider Brotherhood of All Mankind* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911), pp. 12-13.]

### **Prayer of Confession**

Gracious God,  
whose mercy is higher than the heavens,  
wider than our wanderings,  
and deeper than all our sin:  
Receive again your bewildered and broken people.  
Forgive our folly and our excess,  
our coldness to human sorrow,  
our passion for things of the moment.  
Change our hearts and turn all our desires to your way,  
that we may love what you love and do what you command;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[<http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?&pid=2608&srcid=2598> Reformed Church of America]

### **Assurance of Pardon**

When you were dead in trespasses, God made you alive. . .  
(forgiving) all our trespasses,  
erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.  
(God) set this aside, nailing it to the cross. -- *Colossians 2:13-14*

### **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,  
for you are always seeking the lost and rescuing the enslaved. . .

In Jesus Christ, the old has gone and the new has come.  
In him you have sought us out, and welcomed us to your table.  
When those who resented your grace crucified him, you raised him to new life  
and through him you are reconciling the world to yourself.  
At the first sign of repentance, you run to us  
with your arms open and your heart full of compassion.  
Though we squander our birthright,  
you lay the table with the richest food and wine  
to celebrate our restoration to your life.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high, we offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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### **Invitation to the Table\***

We are sometimes a prodigal church.

We sometimes squander the inheritance of community and love and peace and justice  
God has for us and for all.

We can be self-centered and self-serving.

We sometimes squander the abundant resources God bestows by using them to make our church comfortable while others in the world suffer and die because they have so little.

We go along with the idols of partisan politics, measuring success by size of the offering and whether the church's bills are paid.

We use power in the church to gratify our own desires for self-importance and control with little attention to how the church can meet the genuine needs of others.

We sometimes act out our role as elder heir.

We stand in the field listening to the music of God's new community,  
but do not join the celebration.

As a church we do not always welcome people who are different than we are.

In our hearts (if not always in our voices) we believe our congregation (or our denomination) is superior to others.

We speak disrespectfully of other Christians and other faith movements.

We remain silent on important issues because we fear alienating people who pay the bills.

We reinforce the same fragmentation of community  
which is so painful and destructive in the larger world.

Whether we are the prodigal younger or the resentful older, we need to repent.

The presence of this Sacred Table gives us the courage to do just that.

The loaf and the cup remind us we stand before a God of unconditional love.

God welcomed the prodigal long ago to the great celebration with the fatted calf, the family ring, and the festive robe.

God welcomes prodigals today to this celebration meal.

The parable ends with the elder brother leaving to stand away from the celebration, out in the field. Luke intends for the reader to decide not only,

“Will this elder son join the celebration and the community?” but also,

“Will I, the reader, repent, and do the same? Will I join the celebration and the community?”

When you eat of the bread and drink of the cup, you answer that question.

You declare, “I want to be part of God's community of unconditional love, peace, joy, and abundance.”

And then, miracle of miracles, the resurrecting power represented in the loaf and the cup flows through your own life.

When you partake, listen for the music, for you're joining the celebration!  
Come! Commit yourself anew to God's full community of love.

### **Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for March 14, 2010)\***

#### ***Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32***

For more background on Luke-Acts, see the exegetical comments on the second installment of these materials, for January 24, 2010, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Here we recall Luke's thought. The present age is evil and will be replaced by a new age. The Realm of God will be a social and natural world marked by love, peace, joy and community. A central feature of the Realm will be the reunion of Jewish and gentile peoples.

The text for today focuses on the role of repentance in the reunion of Jewish and gentile communities. While Luke tells the story of today's passage as if it took place during the lifetime of Jesus, Luke shaped the text to speak to the church of Luke's own day. Luke wanted that congregation to bring together Jewish and gentile peoples in a community in the present that demonstrated the coming community of the Realm. Luke wanted Jewish and gentile peoples to live together in the present as eschatological community.

Some leaders in the Jewish community outside the church resisted the communion between Jewish and gentile people taking place in the church. The church itself was divided over how this reunion should take place within the congregation. Luke 15:1-2 brings these concerns to mind by picturing the Pharisees and scribes grumbling over the fact that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. In that culture, to eat with another person was to enter into a bond with that person. The tax collectors were objectionable because they were Jewish people who collected disproportionately high taxes from their comrades both to pay for the Roman occupation and to fatten their own pockets. In that culture, the word "sinner" referred to a person who flagrantly disobeyed God. A question in the background is, "Who should be welcome in community?"

Also in the background are the two prongs of the function of repentance in the Jewish world.

- (a) Jewish people within the community who violated God's purpose can be restored by repentance.
- (b) Repentance was one of the first steps for gentiles to convert to Judaism.

The text for today does not resolve these questions in their entirety. But this passage does function in two ways. (1) It *calls those who resist the inclusive community of the Realm to repent* of the ways in which they resist God's intent for the church to be an eschatological community. (2) It *invites people represented by tax collectors, sinners, gentiles, to repent* and become part of the community of the Realm.

In Luke 15:11-24, the younger heir demands that the inheritance be divided. By making this request, the younger heir treats the parent as though dead.

By living among pigs, the younger heir functionally becomes the same as a gentile. When the text says, “He came to himself,” the meaning is that the younger heir repented (Luke 15:17). The fact that the heir engaged in “dissolute living” is a Lukan interpretation of gentile culture. Upon the basis of this act of repentance, the parent welcomes the prodigal heir back into the family.

In the Lukan context, the point of this part of the parable is that all who repent—tax collectors, sinners, gentiles—are welcome in the eschatological communion.

In Luke 15:25-31, the elder heir, who stayed home and faithfully ran the household, is in the field. When advised that the younger heir has returned and a reunion celebration is taking place, the elder heir becomes angry and refuses to go in. The parent pleads with the older heir to come in. As the parable closes, the elder heir is in the field still deciding whether to join the celebration. This literary touch forces the readers to ask what they would do in a similar situation.

Luke wants the elder heir to repent of this sin of inhospitality, this breaking of the family bond, this unacceptance of community. Luke wants the elder heir to join the party.

In view of the reason for preparing these special resources (given in the opening paragraphs above), the preacher might identify people and groups in today’s church and in the larger culture who resist the coming of Realm-like community in the church and in other settings. The sermon can invite them to repent of the ways in which they hinder eschatological community. In the full-bodied sense of repentance (again, articulated in the opening section), this means not only turning away from obstructionist attitudes and behavior but also embracing Realm community..

### ***2 Corinthians 5:16-21***

Christians often interpret this passage from the point of view of the individual: in Christ, an individual becomes a new creation. Each one has a fresh approach to life. While this is true, the deeper point of the text is to call the whole church to become a community of the Realm.

The congregation to whom Paul wrote 2 Corinthians was divided. A group of “super apostles” had come to the community with great rhetorical skill, impressive miracles, and a message that emphasized visions and revelations. This message emphasized the glory of Christian life without taking into account the struggles with evil. The super-apostles played down the importance of being prepared for the second coming and said that spiritual enthusiasm in the present was the goal of Christian life. To Paul, the super-apostles presented a different Jesus and a different gospel from the one that Paul preached. Evidently, many of the Corinthians have accepted that viewpoint.

In the language of the end-time (apocalyptic) world view, the intruders put forward a message that belongs to the old age. Paul writes 2 Corinthians to redirect the Corinthians’ understanding

of the gospel and to defend his apostleship. Like Luke (just above), Paul's goal is for the Corinthian congregation to be an eschatological body whose community life demonstrates the Realm.

Paul begins 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 by emphasizing the Corinthians' need to interpret the super-apostles and the qualities of the community's life from the perspective of Christ (not from a human point of view). They once thought of Christ from a human (old age) point of view. Through Paul's preaching, they come to a new understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul describes Christ as inaugurating the Realm in a limited way in the present and pointing to the coming of the Realm in its fullness when Jesus returns (2 Corinthians 5:16).

If the Corinthians are truly in Christ, they are a "new creation." This expression derives from end-time theology. The "new creation" is the Realm in its fullness. In the present, the congregation is no longer to manifest the divisiveness of the old age ("everything old has passed away") but is to live as a community of the new age ("everything has become new") (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The wonderful possibility of becoming a community of the Realm comes from God who has "reconciled us" (us = plural, community) to God's self. Indeed, God is in the process of reconciling the world (and not just human beings) (2 Corinthians 5:18-19a). The notion of reconciliation refers not just to the individual and God but to the members of the community with one another. Whereas groups in the old age were marked by division (including the competitiveness promoted by the super-apostles), God intends for the community of the new age to be marked by reconciled relationships.

God commissions the church as God's ambassadors. The members of the church are to witness to other individuals. The community life of the church is to make a communal witness. In this context, to be "reconciled to God" is not only for an individual to feel peace with God but is for that person to become a part of the community of the new age. God's purpose in "reconciling the world" is to create a new social and natural world, the Realm of God (2 Corinthians 5:21b-22a).

Paul concludes the passage by saying that God made Christ to "be sin" even though Christ "knew no sin". In this way, through Christ, the community might become the righteousness of God. This means God sent Christ into the world to experience the brokenness of the world (sin). That full experience means the rulers and powers of the old age put him to death. God then raised Christ from the dead to show the presence of the Realm already at work. (2 Corinthians 5:21a).

The apostle says God did this so "in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21b). The "righteousness of God" is a relationship term. Paul means the life of the church demonstrates that God does, indeed, act rightly in behalf of human beings and the world by creating a community of reconciled relationships. When the church is such a community, it proves that God is truly righteous (right-acting).

The notion of reconciliation does not imply that the different elements (members) become the same. It implies that they work together for God's purposes.

Consider exploring the degree to which the congregation (and the wider church) might have fallen prey to contemporary equivalents of the message of the super-apostles. In current Disciples language, to what degree does the church mirror (or even magnify) the fragmentation of the world? What does the church need to do to turn away from further division? How can we turn to becoming a reconciled people?

The preacher might also celebrate the ways in which the congregation (and the wider church) are already a reconciled community.

The preacher might further consider ways that the church can be a reconciling agent in the larger world. How can the church as community be an ambassador of reconciliation to other communities in the world?

### **Closing Prayer\***

All-embracing God, help us embrace those who leave and those who stay, the prodigal and the elder heirs, as we encounter them in our homes, friendships, jobs, schools and leisure activities,. May we become instruments of reunion with you, with us, and with all. May our lives as individuals and our life as a congregation rejoice to the music of your great belonging. Amen.

### **Possible Hymns and Songs**

(Numbers in parenthesis are from the *Chalice Hymnal*)

God Made All People of the World (685)

A Woman and a Coin (Stanza 3) (74)

Come, Share the Lord(408)

I Come with Joy (420)

God Made from One Blood (500)

Jesus is Tenderly Calling Thee Home (343)

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