**ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH, WOODLAND, MI**

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2021**

**\*If you are listening in your car, please tune your radio to 1620 AM\***

**ANNOUNCEMENTS & PRELUDE**

**Gathering**

The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.

**Confession and Forgiveness**

In the name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

God of all mercy and consolation, come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may confess our sin, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

**Amen.**

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another. Most merciful God,

**we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.** **Amen.**

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

**Gathering Song“Rise Up, O Saints of God” ELW 669**

 

**GREETING**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**And also with you.**

**Prayer of the Day**

Let us pray together.

**Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Savior. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord**. **Amen.**

**First Reading**    **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

A reading from Deuteronomy.

[Moses said:] 15The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” 17Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. 18I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Psalm  Psalm 111**

 1Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with | my whole heart,
  in the assembly of the upright, in the | congregation.
 2**Great are your | works, O Lord,**
  **pondered by all who de- | light in them.**
 3Majesty and splendor | mark your deeds,
  and your righteousness en- | dures forever.
 4**You cause your wonders to | be remembered;**
  **you are gracious and full | of compassion.**
 5You give food to | those who fear you,
  remembering forev- | er your covenant.
 6**You have shown your people the power | of your works**
  **in giving them the lands | of the nations.**
 7The works of your hands are faithful- | ness and justice;
  all of your pre- | cepts are sure.
 8**They stand fast forev- | er and ever,**
  **because they are done in | truth and equity.**
 9You sent redemption to your people and commanded your cove- | nant forever;
  holy and awesome | is your name.
 10**The fear of the Lord is the begin- | ning of wisdom;**
  **all who practice this have a good understanding. God’s praise en- | dures forever.**

**Second Reading**  **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

A reading from 1 Corinthians.

1Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3but anyone who loves God is known by him.
  4Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—6yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.
  7It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**Gospel Acclamation**

**Alleluia, Lord, to whom shall we go?**

**Alleluia. You have the words of eternal life.**

**Alleluia, alleluia.**

**Gospel** **Mark 1:21-28**

The holy gospel according to Mark.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

21[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

**SERMON Pastor Becky Ebb Speese “Freedom or Love?”**

 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

 Freedom. We, as Americans, value freedom. We fought the revolutionary war for to be a country free from the rule of England. Immigrants in many generations have come to this country to find freedom, even those seeking to come today. Some people are so desperate for the freedom of a better life, that they are willing to enter in any way that they can. As humans, we are wired to want freedom. Some of our ancestors came to have freedom to worship without a state church. Some of our ancestors came to have freedom of a life without poverty. Some, who have come and are coming in recent generations come to have freedom from war and violence.

There has been a lot of talk and action about freedom in this past year. As we have had things shut down and stay at home orders to protect us from the spread of the virus, there are those who have seen these actions as violating our freedoms. This is a hot button word right now. Protests became violent around our country because of the threat of freedom being taken away.

 I do not want to get into the politics of freedom, but we do need to name the reality that the desire for freedom and how we view freedom has been at the core of some much unrest and division that has happened in around our country this past year. So much has been exposed and the pandemic has served as a powder keg of sorts for racial justice and what it means to live in freedom.

 I hope that learning from Paul in his writing to the church in Corinth can help us navigate the issue of freedom as people of faith in our relationships with one another.

Every generation has unique issues with understanding freedom. When the Christian faith spread to places like Corinth, there were a lot of cultural conflicts between the Jews who had become Christians and the people who came out of pagan backgrounds to become Christians. There were a lot of misunderstandings and clashes and Paul had a unique role in his ministry in the Greek and Roman world, to bring the different cultures together.

 The issue that Paul needed to address in today’s lesson was that of eating food offered to idols. In the pagan world, where the Corinthian Christians lived, most of the food, especially meat, that could be bought in the market place, had initially been offered to idols. Jews had a lot of rituals about how to prepare and eat meat. There were a lot of food laws. So, they would take offense at eating food offered to idols. New Christians from the pagan culture also struggled with eating food offered to idols.

I will tell you that I have eaten food offered to idols. When we lived in Japan, we lived in a small village while waiting for housing on the Navy base. We learned a lot about Japanese culture during that time as we made friends with the people of the village. My brother and I were quite young. I was 7 and he was 5. Times were different then, and we were allowed to play with the village children and roam the country side with them. One day, we were taken to a Shinto cemetery. My brother and I discovered that there was candy at all of the grave sites. We didn’t know why, but what child is not drawn to candy, no matter where we find it. We were excited and sat down in the cemetery and ate the candy. We brought some home in our pockets and showed it to our mom. We quickly got a lesson in the Shinto religion. People would offer food at the graves of their loved ones. They believed that their spirits would be hungry and that they would return to their graves looking for food to eat. My mom told us that Christians do not believe this so by eating the candy, we were encouraging this belief. She also told us that it was disrespectful toward this religion to eat the candy. Now the grave sites, were not idols per say, and it did not hurt us to eat this candy, but we learned an important lesson on respecting other people’s beliefs and traditions that day, and we did not play in the cemetery or eat the candy again.

 Paul did not believe that it was wrong to eat food offered to idols. As Christians, we do not worship idols, (well, actually we do as is laid out in Luther’s explanation to the 1st commandment- anything that we put above God in our lives can be seen as worshipping idols- even freedom can be an idol, but that is for another sermon) we worship God and God alone. So, Paul did not see eating this food as an issue of concern since he did not believe in the idols. But, this was an issue for some of the new Christians. They did feel that it was wrong and if they were to be encouraged to eat the food by other Christians, it would be hurtful to their conscience and faith. So, Paul literally advocated for being a vegetarian himself to keep from causing new Christians to feel that they were falling into sin.”

 ”13Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

 Now, this is not an issue for us today, but we can translate it and how Paul wants us to deal with it to current issues.

 It all comes down to love. As Christians, we are to use our freedom to love each other not to do what we want with no regard for another person.

 ” 9But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

 Paul shares his understanding of the freedom of a Christian in his other letters as well. To the Galatians, he wrote in chapter 5 vs. 13

 “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”

 And also to the Corinthians in chapter 6 vs. 12

 “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I “have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything.

 I have found these passages and Paul’s understanding of freedom as very helpful to me as I have dealt with all kinds of ways to use my freedom, not to be selfish, but to be free to live in loving and respectful ways in relationships with others.

 There are many things that we have freedom to do but in some circumstances this freedom is not beneficial to others. I am so thankful that smoking is no longer allowed in any public places now, but especially in restaurants. I used to hate going through the smoking section in a restaurant to get to the non-smoking section. Now, smokers took a lot of issue when laws were passed about not smoking. Did they have a right to smoke in a restaurant or bar? They did. But did non-smokers have a right to be in the same place without having to smell smoke? They did. This issue was ultimately resolved by laws and not without a lot of conflict and anger along the way. As a non-smoker, this has been a good thing. And I always appreciate when I am with a smoker in an outdoor space or in their home, when they ask if I mind if they smoke, and if I say yes, they abstain. This is living freedom in care and respect for another person.

 We know the consequences of people who drive under the influence, who speed or who text while driving. They often cause accidents. Their sense of freedom to break the law, takes away the freedom of people who end up being injured or killed in accidents.

 I could go on and on. There are lots of examples in our daily lives about how one person’s understanding of freedom can take away from another person’s experience of freedom to live safely or in good conscience.

 Each of us has an understanding of personal freedom. When that understanding gets in the way of another person’s freedom, we can say “it’s a free country. I can do what I want” And to some degree that is true. But is that the loving thing to say when my rights take away from another person’s rights? You know that I will name this current issue today.

 Will I wear a mask around other people? Absolutely. Not just because I want to protect myself, but I want to protect other people.

 Some churches are using their religious freedom to hold in person services because they can.

 You may wonder why we are not using that freedom right now at Zion. We are choosing caution to keep you, our family of faith from getting sick at church because we love you. We have seen the consequences of some church services and activities becoming spreaders of the virus.

 Paul’s answer for us is this: he does not make new laws for us but calls us as Christians to have concern for other people. We are to live together in love in our one Lord Jesus Christ.

 And he makes it clear in the end of our epistle reading for today that when we sin against each other, we are sinning against Jesus.

 In Christian understanding, freedom is not the right to do what we want. Freedom is to love and for our actions to take into consideration the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters. This may mean giving up some of our freedoms but when doing so is the loving thing to do, then we really aren’t giving something up, we are choosing love.

 An upside of all of this, is that when we are loving in how we live our freedom, we will have much better relationships with each other. And in the midst of all of the anger and division and violence in our country, that also makes its way into churches and into families and friends, we can use our freedom to be hurtful to one another and keep the brokenness going or we can choose love as the guiding light of our freedom and work to be a part of the change and healing that we need so much right now.

 We can make a difference with the power of love and we have the freedom to do this.

 May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

**Hymn of the Day “Blest Be the Tie that Binds” ELW 656**



**cREED**

**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 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.**

\*Or, “he descended into hell,” another translation of this text in widespread use.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

*A brief silence.*

For all who share the gospel and proclaim freedom in Christ throughout the world: prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; for the church and its ministries. We pray especially for St. John’s Lutheran Church and Rev. Jim Morgan, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

For all God’s works in creation: plants and animals, water and soil, forests and farms; and for those tasked with protecting our natural resources and all that exists, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

For government and leaders: cities and nations, rescue professionals and legal aid attorneys, elected officials and grassroots organizers; for all responsible for the well-being of civil society, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit: those who are sick and hospitalized, those living with HIV/AIDS, those struggling with mental illness, those who are hungry or homeless, and all in any need; for caregivers, hospice workers, and home health aides, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

For the concerns of this congregation: those who travel, those absent from worship, those celebrating birthdays or anniversaries; for the people of God in this place and for other needs in our community, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

For the covenant God made with us in the waters of baptism, in thanksgiving for the baptized who have died in the Lord, let us pray.

**Have mercy, O God.**

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

**Amen.**

**Peace**

The peace of Christ be with you always.

**And also with you.**

**Offering & Offering Prayer**

Let us pray. God our provider, you have not fed us with bread alone, but with words of grace and life. Bless us and these your gifts, which we receive from your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Thanksgiving at the Table**

In the night in which he was betrayed,

our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks;

broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying:

Take and eat; this is my body, given for you.

Do this for the remembrance of me.

Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks,

and gave it for all to drink, saying:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood,

shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.

Do this for the remembrance of me.

**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.**

**COMMUNION**

The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is given and shed for you. You may receive your communion elements.

**Sending**

God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

**Blessing**

The God of steadfastness and encouragement

grant you to live in harmony with one another,

in accordance with Christ Jesus.

**Amen.**

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,

so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

The God of all grace ☩ bless you now and forever.

**Amen.**

**Sending SonG “The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve” ELW 574**



**Dismissal**

Go in peace. Christ is with you.

**Thanks be to God.**

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**THANK YOU TO ALL WHO SERVED TODAY:**

**Presider: Rebecca Ebb-Speese**

**Musician: Martha Yoder**

**Elder: Paul Meade**

**Trustee: Mike Johnson**

**Offering Counters: Doug Mackenzie and Mike Johnson**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

* + Zion is starting a tech team to do the live stream for our services. Paul Meade will be glad to train people. Please let Pastor Becky or Paul know if you would like to serve in this way.
	+ Council has voted to suspend in-person services until the positivity rate drops to 3%. People may continue to listen to the service in the parking and the service will be streamed.
	+ Counters Needed. We are in need of a few more people to serve as volunteer counters for Sunday Offerings.  If you are willing to serve in this role, please let Martha or Karen know. Thank you.