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**Sunday 2 July 2023 to Sunday 9 July 2023**

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Sunday 2 July 2023

**Welcome to the family**

by Norma Koehne

***Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me (Matthew 10:40).***

Read Matthew 10:40–42

These words come after some rather confronting words from Jesus. He talks about how conflicts will arise in families and communities when we acknowledge him before people (verse 32). Most of us have not experienced being alienated from our parents and siblings by following Christ. However, this is all too real in some parts of the world, and following Christ can even put a person’s life in danger.

In the passage before us, Jesus stresses the importance of Christian fellowship and support. When we welcome and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, we welcome Christ and our loving Heavenly Father. Having been away from close family for most of my adult life, my church family has been an important place of support and love. As we gather, it is vital to welcome each other, especially new members coming into our midst, and get to know them, support them, and encourage them.

Amazingly, we are told we will receive a reward, even for the most insignificant and effortless kindness, like giving someone a cup of water. This shows God’s grace – his undeserved favour – if he wants to reward us for such small acts. Our reward is that we have pleased God by passing on the love he has showered upon us, and we have scattered his blessings among each other.

I am reminded of the almost unbelievable image we have in Zephaniah 3:17: ‘The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing’. What a tremendous encouragement for us to know that the smallest act of love causes our loving Father to rejoice.

**Loving Father, you have embraced us with open arms into your family through baptism. Open our hearts to welcome others who are in your family, showing your love to all. Amen.**

Norma grew up at Koonibba in South Australia. She was a teacher at Concordia College in SA and then served in various roles in Papua New Guinea with her husband. Returning to Australia, Norma worked as an international student advisor and, after completing a PhD, worked in administration at the University of Divinity. She has been privileged to serve the LCA on the General Church Council and Seminary Council and as president of Lutheran Women of Victoria and Lutheran Women of Australia. Currently, she is happily retired.

Monday 3 July 2023

**He loved them to the end**

by Norma Koehne

***Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1b).***

Read John 13:1–17

In our devotions for the rest of this week, we will see how Jesus lovingly prepared his disciples for the violent and confronting days ahead that would lead to his crucifixion and final leave-taking as he ascended into heaven. He forgets what he will face and devotes all his efforts to strengthening them.

This loving act of service performed by Jesus for his disciples would have been shocking for the readers at the time. Only the lowliest of servants were given the task of washing the dusty, dirty, smelly feet of their masters, not the other way around. Peter was justifiably upset, ‘You shall never wash my feet’. However, he had not jumped up and done this task himself. When he realised that to reject this loving act on the part of Jesus was to alienate himself from his teacher and friend, he did an about-turn and asked Jesus to wash him completely. I can’t help but be reminded of my baptism when I was washed clean and made a child of God.

However, this act of service pales in comparison with the even greater acts of service that Jesus lovingly performed and is still performing for us. He took my sins and yours upon himself, died a shameful and painful death upon the cross, and was forsaken by his Father so that we can be reconciled to his Father. Every day we are clothed with the righteousness Jesus won for us. He comes to us with his body and blood to assure us that our sins are forgiven and that we are beloved members of his family.

Truly he has loved us to the end.

***Jesus, by your sinless death, you have washed us in the waters of baptism, covered us with your righteousness, and we appear as pure and spotless before your Father. For all this, we thank and praise you. Amen.***

Tuesday 4 July 2023

**God’s grief when he is betrayed or rejected**

by Norma Koehne

***I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil this passage of Scripture, ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me’ (John 13:18).***

Read John 13:18–30

How hurtful it is when someone we have had a close relationship with rejects us suddenly or shares a secret we have told them, or we hear them speaking badly about us. How much more can we understand that Jesus was troubled in spirit as he knew Judas would soon betray him to those wanting to kill him? He spent two to three years walking the country with this man. Judas saw the miracles Jesus had performed and had been privileged to sit at his feet and be taught by him. We may speculate about the reasons Judas had for betraying Jesus, but ultimately, we are not told his motive.

Even at this time, Jesus was thinking of preparing his disciples by showing them that he knew ahead of time this would happen. He was reinforcing the fact that he was truly God as well as truly human. They would see Judas' betrayal and its results. By telling them about it beforehand, he showed he was in control and knew this would happen.

I am sure many of us grieve over family members who have rejected their faith and turned away from Christ. Be assured God’s grief is even greater than ours. With earnest prayers, we need to plead for them that the Holy Spirit may change their hearts. Additionally, our faithful witness and sharing the love of Christ with them shows them how important our faith is to us. As we know from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, God will never reject them but is waiting with open arms when they repent and turn back. And we are told, ‘there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents’ (Luke 15:10). Let us follow God’s example and never let go of those who need our love and prayers.

***Forgive me, Lord, for the times I have betrayed you by keeping silent instead of acknowledging you before others. Help me to keep those close to me in my prayers, especially if they have turned away from Christ. May your Holy Spirit change their hearts to come back to you. Amen.***

Wednesday 5 July 2023

**God’s love a gift to us so we can love one another**

by Norma Koehne

***Love one another as I have loved you (John 13:35).***

Read John 13:31–38

As part of his preparation for the disciples, Jesus tells them that through the horrific events that will soon unfold, he will be ‘glorified and God is glorified in him’ (verse 31). He is glorified, both in his passion and resurrection. He ‘became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalted him’ (Philippians 2:8b,9).

Because he will soon no longer be with them, he gives them a new command, ‘Love one another. As I have loved, you love one another' (verse 34). What an impossible task Jesus has asked us to perform! How can I possibly love as he has loved? His love was perfect. He loved the unlovable – lepers, sinners, those despised by society at the time. His love was so amazing that he willingly took my sins and yours and paid a horrible price.

And yet, in other places in Scripture, we are told that Jesus does not ask us to do great and wonderful deeds of love. Peter was way off base when he said, ‘I will lay down my life for you’. All Jesus wanted at that time was for the disciples to watch and pray as Jesus had asked when in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although Peter had the courage to go to the high priest’s house, he was not able to witness to the fact that he was a follower of Jesus. His courage failed him. Would I have done better?

Rather than doing heroic and difficult acts of love for our Saviour, we are encouraged to show love in all aspects of our daily life, even the simplest. Jesus tells us that even our smallest acts are acts of love to him. ‘For when I was hungry you gave me food; when I was thirsty you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home; when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help; when in prison you visited me’ (Matthew 25:35,36). Rejoice that you serve your Saviour as you serve others.

***Lord, we thank you for the love that took you to the cross for my sake. Fill my heart with your love so that it may overflow in acts of love to those around me without any conscious effort on my part. Amen.***

Thursday 6 July 2023

**Jesus: the way, the truth, and the life**

by Norma Koehne

***Jesus answered, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6).***

Read John 14:1–14

In our anything-goes post-modern world, we all supposedly manufacture our own truth so that ours is as good as others' and must not be criticised. One hears, again, Pontius Pilate's cynical words, ‘What is truth?’ In such a context, Jesus' words have great power and are confronting to many. He states so clearly that there is only one ultimate saving truth, and this truth is the way to eternal life.

Even in Christian circles, this statement is being modified. When I worked at the University of Divinity, I came across a lecturer teaching about Abrahamic faiths, a supposed way to reconcile Christian, Jewish and Islamic teachings. As Paul said, Abraham is an example of faith, but he cannot reconcile us to the Father. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension open the only way to the Father.

This passage reassures the disciples and us that faith in Christ brings us peace and leads us to a place in the Father’s house that is already prepared for us. To reinforce the strength of his words, Jesus talks about his close relationship with his Father and that his words are the Father’s words. Later in this chapter, in verse 26, he tells the disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit ‘who will teach [them] all things and remind of everything [he has] said to [them]’. We have the assurance that we can trust God’s word. What is written in the Bible is the truth, revealing to us God and his love, his plan of salvation, and his holy will for the world, the church, and his children.

***When we are bombarded every day with so many so-called truths, please help us to remain firm in our faith in your Son, our Saviour, who is the only way, truth, and life. Amen.***

Friday 7 July 2023

**Our Triune God never leaves us to battle on our own**

by Norma Koehne

***If you love me keep my commands, and I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth (John 14:15–17a).***

Read John 14:15–31

At the end of this passage, Jesus alludes to the task ahead of him – defeating Satan. He willingly goes to the cross because he loves his Father and does precisely as commanded.

As we follow Christ, we follow his example. Love firstly means loving God will all our heart, soul, strength and mind and then doing all that he has commanded in his holy word. So often today, that means being counter-cultural, turning our backs on so many things the world around us values. This has been the path of Christians throughout the centuries from the time of the Apostles. The church, and we, as God’s people, go astray when we become too comfortable with the world. There are numerous examples, such as the church becoming a political power at the time of Martin Luther.

We need not fear when we seem to be becoming an isolated – even despised – group. Jesus has not left us as orphans, but we have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth supporting and walking beside us. We see the Trinity at work in harmony. The Son requests, the Father gives, and the Holy Spirit comes. We have some wonderful promises if we remain faithful. As Jesus says, ‘the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them’. More than that, he promises, ‘We will make our home with them’. Perhaps best of all, he promises, ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you’.

Surrounded with God's love, with the Spirit making his home among us, and with the peace that only Christ can give, we can be bold in remaining steadfast despite the opposition of the world and, like the Apostles, proclaim the good news of God’s love and salvation through Christ.

***Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you that together, you surround us with your loving care so that we can have the fullness of joy and peace that only you can give us. Amen.***

Saturday 8 July 2023

**Let us praise God with all our being**

by Norma Koehne

***All your works praise you, Lord; your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might (Psalm 145:10,11).***

Read Psalm 145:8–14

It is good to close this week with this magnificent song of praise to our amazing God. We have seen during the week how the Son has lovingly prepared his disciples for his suffering, death and final ascension when he would leave them. Importantly, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with and sustain them.

Like the disciples, we are often confused, doubting or, even worse, overconfident in our own strength. We quail before the command of Jesus to love as he has loved. We are beset every day with the false values of our world and even its hostility or apathy. So let’s reflect on the awesome nature of God. His acts are mighty, his kingdom is eternal, and his rule is enduring. Whatever our failings, he is gracious and compassionate. When we fail or are depressed, he lifts us up and forgives us.

As God’s faithful people, let us extol him and tell those around us all that he has done for us, how he has been with us, surrounding us with love all our days. How rich our lives have been, lived with the abiding peace and joy that are the precious gifts given to us through Christ. He has promised to be with us ‘to the end of the age’. He is faithful and keeps his promise.

Let us worship God with the angels in heaven, saying, ‘Amen! Praise and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honour, power, and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen’ (Revelation 7:12).

***Lord, I will exalt you, my God and King; I will praise your name forever. Every day, I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever ... and I will meditate on your wonderful works. Amen.***

Sunday 9 July 2023

**Rest**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).***

Read Matthew 11:16–19,25–30

In Papua New Guinea, the women would carry unbelievable loads on their backs in a *bilum* (pronounced ‘billum’). A bilum is what we would call a string bag. They would load up vegetables from their garden, maybe some firewood on top, and perhaps even a baby on top of that. Imagine the relief when, finally, they could unburden themselves of the load. Now they could have rest.

On a church frontage near where I lived is a wrought iron cross, and on that cross hangs a bilum. What a great illustration – burdens loaded onto the cross so there could be rest.

We know what it is to be weary and burdened. Lots of things are like a huge weight, pushing us down. Jesus offers rest. Come, he says, come to me, and I will give you rest.

In these verses, Jesus is especially referring to the burden of having to perform, meet standards and do all the right things to ensure God’s approval. And that is a burden that easily weighs down. Jesus is the ‘friend of tax collectors and sinners’ (verse 19). That was an accusation thrown at him, but it was also accurate. He comes to relieve the burden and give rest.

A Melanesian Pidgin term that applies well here is the phrase for peace: *bel isi*. ‘Bel’ is your stomach, where we feel things. We talk about having butterflies in our stomachs. We feel sick in the stomach when we are worried. And ‘isi’ means easy, relaxed, calm, at ease, at rest. Jesus encourages his hearers to not allow the burden of expectation to overwhelm them but to come to him, trust him and learn from him. He will give rest. Jesus will bring calm. He will ease anxious hearts.

And the new burden he gives is easy, and it is light. In Romans 13:8, the Apostle Paul tells us, ‘Be under obligation to no-one – the only obligation you have is to love one another’. There is rest for you when you relax in the gracious, accepting arms of Jesus and simply love. I sure need that, and I’m sure you do, too.

***Jesus, it wears me out constantly trying to please you and feeling as though I’m not doing enough. Give me rest. Ease my burdens. I leave them at your cross. It is enough. Amen.***

*Pastor Jim is a retired pastor living on Brisbane Northside. He served in Papua New Guinea and as School Pastor in a number of schools and congregations with schools. He is married to Ruth and has three children and seven grandchildren and loves them all unconditionally. He loves to share the Gospel as simply and clearly as he can.*