

Mercy to All
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 67

- ¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
² that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
⁷ May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Let's start with the very end, shall we? Paul writes, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." My modern ears take umbrage to the idea of God "making" me disobedient just so God could show me how great and merciful God is. That sounds pretty manipulative, if you ask me. And that's not the God I believe in so I needed to do some digging.

The word we read as "imprisoned" means literally "shut up completely" or "enclosed" so I can understand the translation of "imprisoned." But the word ἀπειθείαν, which we hear as disobedience, means obstinacy, and, more specifically, "obstinate opposition to the divine will." That makes what Paul said "For God has imprisoned all in obstinate opposition to the divine will so that he may be merciful to all." Let's keep in mind that Paul is also the one who wrote "to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My

grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”¹ To Paul to be imprisoned for God was to be ever closer, ever more attached to God, ever more reliant on God, ever more belonging to God, not an act of manipulation but of love. Paul even refers to himself as “a prisoner for Christ Jesus.”²

And the obstinate opposition to the divine will? Frankly, that is just another definition for free will. God gives us the freedom to choose what we will and what we choose is so rarely God’s will over ours. So God has given us free will as a gift so that we choose God on our own, not because God has forced us to, or manipulated us to. How much easier would it be to be faithful to God if we did not have that choice? And so we are imprisoned by our free will, not because God has made it a prison but because our free will is something we use in a way which is counter to God – we have imprisoned ourselves in God’s gift. Paul explains “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”³ Then that makes what Paul said, “For God has given us the gift of free will in which we have imprisoned ourselves in obstinate opposition to the divine will so that he may be merciful to all.”

We’re getting somewhere, yes? So God has given us free will because it is the right, kind, loving thing to do, even while knowing we will not use it to get closer to God but try to get further, and, because God knows what we will do with this gift, God is presented with myriad opportunities to be merciful to us all. This is a God I recognize. Every generation retells the same story of a God of love, taking comfort in God through its own words. Paul’s words for his generation are “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”

For the Hebrew people in the time of the psalms, a loving God is, among other things, a God who judges the people with equity and guides the nations. This loving God with saving power is known to the earth through God’s people. The reading from Psalms opens with words which may be familiar to you, with a small switch, and these words would have been familiar to the Hebrew people as well. The original language comes from the book of Numbers: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”⁴ The psalm opens “May God be gracious to **us** and bless **us** and make his face to shine upon **us**, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.”

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:7-8

² Ephesians 3:1

³ Romans 7:15

⁴ Numbers 6:22-27

God's blessing and God's mercy then, when we set aside our version of free will for God's intention, bring forth our gratitude, our reverence, our praise. This place and this time in the week are holy space to remind us of God's will, to give us one place and a way to show our gratitude to God, to revere God, and, yes, to praise God. My work is to encourage and facilitate and make room for all of these things each Sunday morning. I think you know that there are more opportunities to do this beyond these walls and this day. There are so many resources to guide you in your gratitude, reverence, and praise, available at the tip of your fingers with a Google search for Christian devotions or in the hymnals in front of you or through any number of volunteer organizations. There's a resource, too, in our Presbyterian Book of Order, with an entire chapter devoted to "Worship and Personal Discipleship."

The chapter's first paragraph states: "The life of the Christian flows from the worship of the church, where identity as a believer is confirmed and where one is commissioned to a life of discipleship and of personal response to God. The believer's life of response and discipleship flows into the church's life of worship and service." What a lovely cycle. To serve as a guide, the chapter includes sections on *The Discipline of Daily Personal Worship*, *Scripture in Personal Worship*, *Prayer in Personal Worship*, and *Other Disciplines in Personal Worship and Discipleship*.

Before I tell you some of what you can expect to find, I think I need to acknowledge that I realize some of you are sitting there thinking "I don't have time to do this." Boy, do I understand that. But let me liken it to spiritual exercise. If you have ever embarked upon a regimen of physical exercise after not exercising for a while, or ever, you've found that if you stick with it, you reach a point where you can't imagine **not** exercising and you can't believe how much better you feel after you've exercised. Do you see where I'm going here? Making time for personal worship, spiritual exercise, and sticking with it, is one of those activities which propels itself forward once you get in the rhythm of doing it. And like physical exercise often improves how you feel about your outward appearance, spiritual exercise can do the same for your inward appearance. So let me tell you what guidance you can find in the Book of Order.

From the section entitled *Prayer in Personal Worship* is a long list of what prayer can be.⁵ Prayer can be conscious conversation with God or meditation. Prayer can also be drawing near God in solitude or enacted prayer through dance, physical exercise, or music. Prayer can be public witness through keeping a vigil, through deeds of social responsibility or protest, or through symbolic acts of disciplined service, too. Today, after worship, I'll put out printed copies of the personal worship chapter of the Book of Order on the table where the bulletins rest. Please feel free to take one, even if only to satisfy curiosity.

⁵ Book of Order: W-5.000

Now that you have a resource ready at your fingertips, I'm going to ask something of you, on behalf of our God who has gifted us with free will and mercy. I may have said before that the beginning of a new school year has always felt to me more like a time for new resolutions than the beginning of the calendar year. Knowing that resolutions which stick are manageable in size and supported by those around you, I am suggesting we take on a spiritual exercise program together.

I wouldn't think of dictating which exercises you should do. If you told me I could only run or skateboard and not walk or bicycle, that would be the end of my participation. What I will do, though, is give you some suggestions, either to try on for size or for those who, like me, would rather be told what to do when. And just like a variety of physical exercise (aerobic, balance, strength training, flexibility) is advisable for fullest effect, I'll make sure to have a variety of spiritual exercises. Each week, on the bulletin table, beginning September 7, I'll have a week of spiritual exercise suggestions printed to take and I'll include them in the newsletter, too. For those of you on Twitter⁶ and/or Facebook⁷, I'll be sharing how it's going for me and welcome your comments on how it's going for you. And for those who aren't, please let me know how it's going for you when we see one another and I'll do the same; share your progress and your challenges with each other, too. In this way your life of response and discipleship will flow into the church's life of worship and service. And, in so doing, let the peoples praise God; let all the peoples praise God!

Let us pray: God of mercy, we seek to use our free will as you intended so we might always be praising you. Help us, we pray. Amen.

⁶ @revnfarley

⁷ www.facebook.com/FirstPresbyterianWaukesha