



## Is It Fair?

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### Gathering

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **green** cloth or scarf because we are now in "ordinary" time or a time of "growing together". Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

### Light Candle

Jesus said:

"I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

We light this candle, and we are invited to be drawn to its flame,

just as God draws us to Godself.

So we take a deep breathe and know ourselves loved and held.

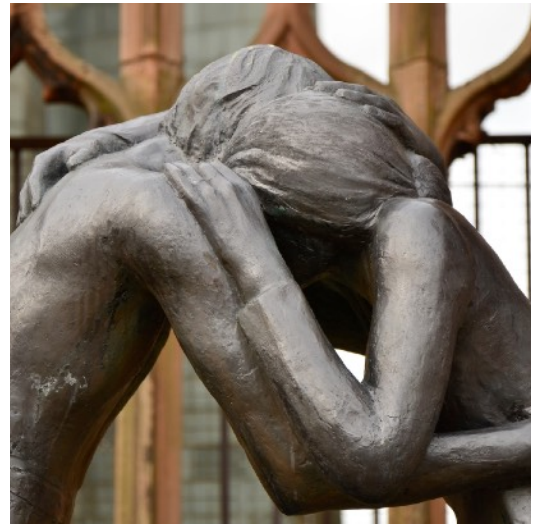


Image: Ben Sutherland  
Reconciliation by Josefina de Vasconcellos at Coventry Cathedral

### Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples. From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders:

those who have carried the sacred stories from generation to generation

those who carry the sacred stories today

and those who are learning and growing so that the sacred stories may be carried into the future.

We pray for the future of their communities and that our hearts and minds will be open as we shape a future together.

***May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.***

(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here.

### Introduction

Fairness, equality, equity, justice.

They are all words we use from time to time, but what do they mean and what place do they have in the reign of God?

Today we will hear of Joseph's reunion and reconciliation with his brothers, continuing the theme of family relationships that are not straight forward.

And we will hear of a woman, a woman from a different ethnic background to Jesus and his disciples, who comes to Jesus seeking healing for her daughter.

Fairness, equality, equity, justice.

What are they?

## Call To Worship

### Psalm 133

- <sup>1</sup> How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity!
- <sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes.
- <sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
For there the Lord ordained [God's] blessing,  
life for evermore.

Beloved disciples, welcome! We gather as people reconciled to one another and God through grace, a gift freely and lovingly given that we do not earn or deserve. We receive the marvellous work of grace in our lives, and we wonder, "Is it fair?"

**No! God's grace is not fair, but a gift of God's mercy.**

We gather as neighbours who have experienced difficulties of every kind. We feel uncertain, fearful, and overwhelmed, and we wonder, "Is it fair?"

**No! Our difficulties are not fair, and God's grace meets our uncertainty with mercy and love.**

We gather as a community that knows the suffering of our neighbours. We look at the effects of poverty, food insecurity, and trauma in our neighbourhoods, and we wonder, "Is it fair?"

**No! The suffering of our neighbours is not fair, and God's grace calls us to respond to suffering with mercy and justice.**

We gather as people who question how to live into God's abundance and flourishing in a world built on scarcity and greed, and we wonder, "Is it fair?"

**Yes! God's life of abundance and flourishing is fair, because it is merciful. May God's grace form us into people of mercy, justice, compassion, and truth-telling as we gather today. Amen.**

*Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2023.*

### Sing - Come O God Of All The Earth (TIS 181)

Come, O God of all the earth:  
come to us O Righteous One;  
come, and bring our love to birth:  
in the glory of your Son.

*Sing out, earth and skies!  
Sing of the God who loves you;  
raise your joyful cries;  
dance to the life around you.*

Come, O God of wind and flame:  
fill the earth with righteousness;  
teach us all to sing your name:  
may our lives your love confess.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O God of flashing light:  
twinkling star and burning sun;  
God of day and God of night:  
in your light we all are one.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O God of snow and rain:  
shower down upon the earth;  
come, O God of joy and pain:  
God of sorrow, God of mirth.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O Justice, come, O Peace:  
come and shape our hearts anew;  
come and make oppression cease:  
bring us all to life in you.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

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### **Prayer - Praise**

God of all the earth,  
you come to us and you re-ignite our hearts with love that is beyond our imagining.  
God of wind and flame,  
you come to us and fill our mouths with your song of joy.  
God of the sun and moon and stars,  
you come to us and invite us to reach beyond ourselves to embrace this world and all its peoples.  
God of Justice and Peace,  
you come to us and seek to shape us to reflect the abundant life you have shown us in Jesus.

As the earth and all its creatures sing their praises to you,  
as they whisper your name  
and speak of your love,  
may we join their song,  
may we learn to dance together with you.

### **Confession**

And as we learn again to sing and to dance to your tune, Gracious God,  
strip away the mask we wear during the week to "get by."  
Give us a new sense of your freedom to be who you created to be,  
as we lay our souls bare before you today.

Let us see genuine love in the world around us.  
Let us see genuine love in ourselves.  
Show us the love that hates evil and holds onto what is good.

Strip away the mask that holds our emotions in check when we could share your love with someone.  
Let us see the joy of giving to others.  
Show us the power of blessing those who persecute us.  
Strip away the mask that grins and lies and lets the world think otherwise about a child of God.  
Let us be gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation - embracing those who are hurting and reaching out to those who have hurt us.  
And as we seek to embrace others, so embrace us, merciful God, in your healing and boundless love and grace, that we may know ourselves to be forgiven, loved and free.  
Amen.

*Written by Kwasi I. Kena, adapted  
The Africana Worship Book, Year A (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 149.*

## **Sing** - The Anointing (Seasons 9-32)

*This song invites us to listen, to tune in to God and to God speaking through the people around us.*

*Lead us to listen,  
to hear the heart speak.  
O God in the quiet voice,  
draw us to you.  
Awaken our wisdom,  
enlighten our vision.  
Anoint us to heal  
and to love as you do.*

May we be slow to judge,  
may we learn to forgive.  
Through compassion and kindness,  
may we let others live.  
*Lead us to listen...*

Give us faith that is strong,  
give us hope that is bright.  
May the small voice be our concern,  
may we make burdens light.  
*Lead us to listen...*

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### **Listening for God's Voice**

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#### ***Intro to readings***

Last week, we heard the first part of the story of Joseph. After being beaten and left for dead, we left Joseph being carried off to Egypt and enslaved.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures picks up Joseph's story as he is reconciled with his brothers - but I just want to remind you of what we have missed out on -

When he got to Egypt, Joseph was sold to a man called Potiphar.

Joseph served Potiphar faithfully until he was accused, falsely, of assaulting Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison.

In prison, he became known for caring for the other prisoners and for his side hustle of interpreting dreams. At least 2 years later (Genesis 41:1), Pharaoh starts having weird dreams and when his own people cannot interpret them, someone remembers Joseph. And so he is brought before Pharaoh, interprets his dreams and is then put in charge of Egypt's national effort to store grain in the good years and to manage its distribution when drought hits.

So during a time of drought and famine, Jacob's family run out of food but they hear that there is grain in Egypt. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food for the family.

Joseph recognises his brothers as they approach him - but they have no idea who he is. So Joseph almost "plays" with them.

He first of all accuses them of being spies (42:9) and then demands they bring their youngest brother to him to prove they are not (42:15).

As they head home, with the grain they had purchased, they discover that all the money they had paid for the grain had been put back in their sacks.

Eventually they run out of food again and this time Jacob agrees to the brothers taking Benjamin with them to buy more food.

Joseph gets pretty emotional when he sees Benjamin but he hasn't finished manipulating his brothers just yet.

He has someone hide one of his silver cups in Benjamin's sack. And then as the brothers begin to head for home, Joseph sends his men after them accusing them of stealing - and, of course, arresting Benjamin when they find the cup in his sack.

The brothers then plead with Joseph, imploring him to let Benjamin go and to take one of the others instead - telling Joseph how much Jacob had grieved for the son he had lost and that to lose another would destroy him.

### **Reading: Genesis 45:1-15**

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup>And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup>Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

<sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup>And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup>For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup>God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup>So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. <sup>10</sup>You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. <sup>11</sup>I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty." <sup>12</sup>And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup>You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' <sup>14</sup>Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup>And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

### **Reading: Matthew 15:21-28**

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>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.' <sup>23</sup>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.' <sup>24</sup>He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' <sup>26</sup>He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' <sup>27</sup>She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

### **Reflection**

Wise and loving God, when relationships are fractured, journey with us in the life-giving process of reconciliation. Fill us with patience and unconditional love so that we might forgive as we have been forgiven. In Christ. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for 20 August 2023, Pentecost A 2023, p.146*

Is it fair?

Is it fair for Joseph to play games with his brothers before he reveals to them who he is and seeks to be reconciled with them?

And the idea, as Joseph suggests, that God would orchestrate Joseph being sold into slavery to secure the future of Israel - well, that is deeply problematic.

Is it fair that Jesus should keep his gift of healing only for the people of Israel and not share it with this desperate, foreign mother who seeks for her daughter to be made well?

What is it about the idea of fairness that is so seductive, so ingrained in us?

I mean, here in Australia, the idea that everyone should be given a "fair go" is fundamental to who we are, isn't it?

Or is it?

So I want to offer a few thoughts about these two stories, and perhaps invite us to think about what we mean by fair...

Remember, the ancient stories in Genesis were written down at a time that the people of Israel were in exile. They were compiled in order to remind the Hebrew people of where they had come from, who they were, and their identity.

The idea that God has been working in and amongst them since the beginning of time is important to them as the people of the covenant. And the story of how they ended up as slaves in Egypt sets the scene for their liberation and freedom in the land God had promised them.

The story is told of a deeply human family responding to the world around them - to human pride, broken relationships, environmental challenges such as drought and flood - and of these flawed and, we have to admit, sometimes dysfunctional people seeking their way and growing in their understanding of God.

So when Joseph tricks his brothers, we are not surprised.

And when he attributes it all to God "preserving" their family (45:7), we can hold it in the sense of God's purposes being enacted sometimes, perhaps often, in spite of our human brokenness.

The story we heard from the gospel attributed to Matthew, about Jesus' encounter with a woman from Canaan (15:22), offers what I think is a surprising and somewhat confronting episode in Jesus' ministry. But, for Matthew, this encounter is a turning point. And it comes, in Matthew's account, not long after Jesus has fed the crowd with bread and fish (14:13-21).

First of all, this story is set in an area that is predominantly gentile territory. Jesus has left the Jewish towns and cities and entered another place, a non-Jewish area (15:21).

A woman comes looking for help for her daughter. Matthew says she comes from Canaan, Mark says she is Greek, from Syro-Phoenicia (Mark 7:26). Wherever she comes from, she is foreign, immediately marked as "other" - well, not Jewish, "not like us".

She is determined to attract Jesus' attention, shouting, acknowledging his place in the royal line of Israel, Jesus, Son of David (15:22).

All she wants is healing for her little girl.

But the disciples want her gone - and they urge Jesus to send her away (15:23) - she is inconvenient, and perhaps making them feel uncomfortable.

Jesus says that he was only sent to Israel (15:24).

But she kneels before him, pleading for help (15:25).

'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' he says. (15:26)

As much as we might try, we cannot get around the reality that Jesus is both harsh and a bit rude here. The phrase Jesus uses, equates the woman to the dogs. It is at best arrogant, and at worst demeaning and even somewhere in between it is derogatory.

But this unnamed woman is also smart and responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (15:27).

And remember the bread and fish? - the left-overs, the crumbs, amounted to 12 baskets full (14:20) - even the left-overs are abundant, enough, for her and her little girl!

God's grace, God's mercy has no limits - no limit on its abundance, and no limit on who it is for.

For Matthew, this story is both a story of grace and mercy and a story that begins the opening up of God's grace for all people - which by the end of Matthew's gospel will unequivocally see the disciples sent to "all the world" to make disciples (28:19).

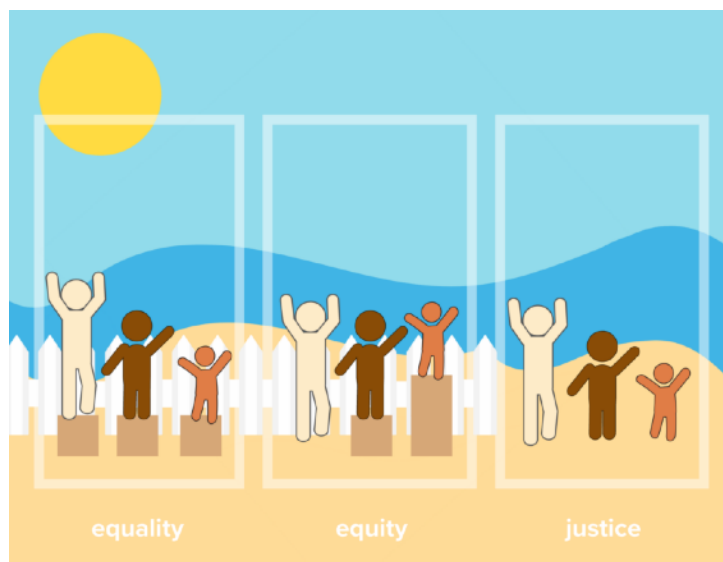
How often do we run out of grace?

How often do we find it hard to offer mercy?

How often do we want to confine God's grace and mercy to those people we think deserve it?

And how might we instead be vessels of an extravagant grace that is offered to everyone without question?

So with all that in mind, let's think about what we mean when we talk about equality, equity and justice. Have a look at this image:



Equality means everyone gets treated the same - but notice the short person here - getting the same as everyone else means they still can't see over the fence.

Equity offers different people different solutions, solutions that meet each person's particular needs so that, at the end of the day, everyone gets to see over the fence.

But justice - justice means removing the fence altogether - so that the fence no longer is an impediment to anyone.

In our world, we often think that to offer equity is enough. But God's way insists on justice. In our world, we think that there is a limit to grace, to mercy, to justice - like it is a pie and if I offer some to you, then either I get less or there is somehow less to go around. But God's way is to remind us that there is no limit to grace - and, in fact, even the crumbs are abundant!

So the argument that we need to be careful with grace - just doesn't wash... There is always room for justice - for Joseph and his brothers to be reconciled - for us to find reconciliation even in the most broken of relationships. There is always room for justice - for the unheard to have a voice - for the foreign woman to capture Jesus' attention and find healing for her daughter - for the First Nations of this land to be heard and find healing for their communities. The request of our indigenous brothers and sisters that they be heard in our government doesn't mean someone else misses out.

Is it fair?

If we hold on to our human concepts of "fair", then God's grace is certainly not fair! God's grace is offered freely, undeservedly, abundantly. Praise be to God!

Generous God, we thank you for your grace. As we share your grace with the world around us, help us also to learn how to be abundantly generous. When we are tempted to place limits on the grace we offer and to whom, nudge us, shake us or, if needed, shout at us, as that brave woman shouted at Jesus, that as we experience your grace, we may share abundantly with those around us. Amen.

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## Responding

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**Sing** - Called As Partners (tune: Hyfrydol - TIS 217(i))

Called as partners in Christ's service,  
called to ministries of grace,  
we respond with deep commitment;  
fresh new lines of faith to trace.  
May we learn the art of sharing,  
side by side and friend with friend,  
Equal partners in our caring;  
to fulfil God's chosen end.

Christ's example, Christ's inspiring,  
Christ's clear call to work and worth,  
let us follow, never faltering,  
reconciling folk on earth.  
Men and women, richer, poorer;  
all God's people, young and old,  
blending human skills together;  
gracious gifts from God enfold.

Thus new patterns for Christ's mission,  
in a small or global sense,  
let us bear each other's burdens,  
breaking down each wall or fence.  
Words of comfort, words of vision,  
words of challenge, said with care,  
bring new power and strength for action;  
make us colleagues, free and fair.

So God grant us for tomorrow,  
ways to order human life  
that surround each person's sorrow  
with a calm that conquers strife.  
Make us partners in our living,  
our compassion to increase,  
messengers of faith, thus giving  
hope and confidence and peace.

*From "A Singing Faith"  
Words copyright 1981 Jane Parker Huber*



### **Prayer for Others** (Helen Laidlaw)

Our Loving Father/Mother God

As we bring our prayers today, each person will have different prayers as we are all unique, all different. But that is OK as it is we were made by you, and we are fashioned by the experiences of our lives.

We have so much to thank you for – a safe country, a wonderful climate, comfortable houses and lots to eat. Also being able to worship together allows us to share our thoughts and friendships.

However there is so much we ache for – whether it is the daily tragedies across the world and our inability to change them OR it is the pain for the things in our lives which we can't change. Help us to daily hand these anxieties to you, and listen for your response and guidance. Sometimes it is signing a petition, making a phone call or giving a donation.

My personal prayer is for the referendum and the Voice to parliament. I have some insight into the feelings of my Aboriginal friends who feel change is essential. As Pastor Ray Minniecon puts it in his Redfern prayer:

God of our Dreaming. Father of all our Aboriginal nations in Australia. You have lived among us since time immemorial. We have always known You. You gave this land to our Aboriginal nations. You have not dispossessed us nor destroyed us.

People from other lands, who do not understand our unique culture, our unique lifestyle and our unique heritage have come and destroyed much of our way of life. Many of these people from other lands now want to understand and reconcile with us. But for many of us Aboriginal people, we find this reconciliation business a little difficult.

The Uniting Church has backed the YES vote in the referendum and challenges each of us to vote YES, and we need to chat to other people we meet who feel ignorant of the issues.

I also pray for your guidance as we elect new people onto committees and help us to encourage others to comment on how we can best connect with our community. We are putting together a Mission Plan and each person can have a fresh insight. Be with the Elders and pastoral carers as they connect with our members who are ill, depressed or sad. Help us all to be good listeners.

In Jesus' name, Amen

### **Offering**

*As we have received, so we consider our response...*

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our response to God's nudging today.*

Creator and architect of the universe, we want to believe that your love for us means you will go before us on life's path and clear the way, making it easy to travel, but our experience doesn't always bear that out.

We know you see a bigger picture than we do.

As we bring you our offerings this day, we affirm your presence with us in the pits of despair as well as in the palaces of plenty. We give with gratitude, in Christ's holy name.

Amen. (*Gen 45:1-15*)

*United Methodist Church*

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## Sending

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### **Sing** - May The God of Hope

May the God of hope go with us every day,  
filling all our lives with love and joy and  
peace.

May the God of justice speed us on our  
way,  
bringing light and hope to every land and  
race.

*Praying, let us work for peace,  
singing, share our joy with all.  
Working for a world that's new,  
faithful when we hear Christ's call.*

May the God of healing free the earth from  
fear,  
freeing us for peace, both treasured and  
pursued.

May the God of love keep our commitment  
clear  
to a world restored, to human life renewed.

*Praying, let us work for peace,  
singing, share our joy with all.  
Working for a world that's new,  
faithful when we hear Christ's call.*

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Stanza 2: Ann Mitchell. Copyright © Choristers Guild.

### **Sending**

Beloved, is it fair?

As you go today asking this question, remember:  
whether your answer is yes or no, there is always room  
for more mercy,  
for more grace.

In a world preoccupied with fairness, may we go to be people of God's grace and mercy.

*United Methodist Church, adapted*

### **Blessing**

And may the God of Justice bless you with grace and mercy;  
the Christ of healing and hope bless you with love that is always enough;  
the Spirit of wisdom bless you with open hearts and minds ready to embrace anyone who  
comes your way;  
today and always. Amen.

Liturgy adapted from material from:

- *Seasons of the Spirit*, Resources for 20 August 2023, Pentecost A 2023
- United Methodist Church, *Discipleship Ministries*, Resources for 20 August 2023  
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/the-path-of-the-disciple-searching-for-the-face-of-god/twelfth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/twelfth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

Rev Kath Merrifield  
20 August 2023