Worship Resources for September 8th—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 18:1-11 or Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 or Psalm 1; Luke 14:25-33; Philemon 1:1-21

Jeremiah 18 contains the image of God as the potter and Israel as the clay, an image used elsewhere but in this instance, the intended purpose of the clay has been changed because Israel has gone astray. The pottery has been “spoiled” (vs. 4) and God is reworking it, but evil now will come, closer and closer as the turning of the potter’s wheel. It has been set in motion and cannot be stopped unless they turn their ways. Jeremiah was called to proclaim this dangerous message to leaders who did not believe it and to people who did not want to hear it. They had forgotten that it was God who built them up, and it is God who ultimately can deliver them again, if they turn back. God can still make something new.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 gives the Israelites the option of life or death, blessing or curse, as they prepare to enter the land that was prepared for them. For those who follow God, obey the commandments, observe the ways they have been taught, God’s blessings are with them now and always. But for those who go astray, who do not follow the commandments and what they have been taught, it will lead only to death. This is part of the final discourse of Moses, warning the people that the way they live their lives matters. The way we live our lives shows our faithfulness to God, our upholding the covenant. God cannot break the covenant, only we can.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful song remembering our origins in God, that we come from God, and there is no place we can go that is too far away from God. God made us in the womb, and God continues to draw us close—even when we stray far away, God is still very near to us, ready to draw us back.

Psalm 1 reflects the blessings and curse of life choice reflected in Deuteronomy. For those who turn towards God, the blessings of life are found in the life well-lived; for those who turn away from God, they will not experience the blessings. This isn’t about worldly success and riches, but rather the blessings are wisdom and fulfillment—even joy—for those who choose to follow God.

Luke 14:25-33 is a timely passage—as I write this, the United States is on the brink of military involvement in Syria. After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are more aware than ever of weighing the cost of war. And the cost is not always the matters in the forefront, such as the loss of life, civilians and soldiers, the monetary cost; the cost is also the PTSD, those who live with loss of limb and brain injury, families who have lost a loved one. As Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship, we might think of the cost of standing up for justice and speaking out against intervening by war—there is not only the cost of our reputation, but the further cost of continued loss of life, of violence in the world. Following Jesus is risky business. We must carry our cross—the instrument of Jesus’ own death. What must you put to death in order to follow Jesus? What must you bear? Is it humiliation? Is it the loss of respect by others? What is the cost to you?

Philemon is a very short letter by Paul concerning Onesimus, a slave who came to Paul who has run away from Philemon, but is returning to him. The Revised Common Lectionary excludes the last few verses of personal note, but verse 22 is very important because Paul is going to follow up and make sure that Philemon is treating Onesimus well, for Philemon is a follower of Jesus. Paul’s letter is a masterful work of rhetoric in hopes of convincing Philemon to not be harsh to Onesimus, but to welcome him back and to see him differently—no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul is calling for Philemon to change his mind, to change his view. In our churches (at least in many mainline denominations), as we have grown from first rejecting our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters completely, to welcoming but not condoning, to--in many churches--finally full acceptance and affirmation knowing that our understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity has been growing and changing, where do we still need to change our minds? Who are we still keeping out or treating as less than? It may be people in the LGBTQ community; it may be people who speak a different language or who are undocumented; it may be people of a different economic status than us. We may still find that we have room to change our own minds.

There are two ways to live: to live into God’s ways, or to live into the way of the wicked. It is clear in the Scriptures that the way of the wicked is to abandon God. Do we abandon God in exchange for a set of rigorous rules? Do we abandon God in exchange for worldly success, comfort and wealth? Do we abandon God to be around people who think, look and act like us, where we are comfortable? Or do we seek God’s ways, which are not always easy but are often hard—to be among people who are different, to be open to learning new ways of thinking, to stand against war, injustice, and poverty? One way is more straightforward and easy, but serves ourselves. The other way is harder, but serves others, and is concerned about the whole community—the whole kingdom—the whole reign of God.

Call to Worship

God of Creation, Majesty and Glory

 **We come to worship You**

God of Humanity, who makes us Family

 **We come to celebrate with You**

God of Beauty, Wonder and Mystery

 **We come to praise and be in awe of You**

God of all Nations, of all Peoples, of all Places

 **We are invited, and we in turn invite each other**

 **To worship, celebrate and praise You! Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Great Artist of Creation, we confess that we have insisted on our own way and have resisted Your work in us. We have pulled away when You pushed us in; we have fallen down when You pulled us up. The wheel of life is turning and we are the clay. Help us to become a new creation and to trust in Your working in us, as You fashion and mold us into something new, so that the world cannot crack and break us. You are the Potter and we are the clay, and we are in Your hands. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Where can we go from Your Spirit? Where can we flee from Your Presence? You are everywhere, in all times, in all places. We can run as far away as possible, and yet You still draw near to us. Help us to know that we are forgiven, we are loved, and we are renewed. Amen.

Prayer

Holy Jesus, You call us into a life that others have told us is easy, but it is not. You challenge us to forgive, to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us. We want the easy way, but You have given us the hard path. Grant us the patience and endurance to journey with You, to allow ourselves at times to stumble, to live into the hard way so that we might fully experience Your love, grace and peace in this world, by becoming a people full of love and grace and forgiving others. In Your name we pray. Amen.