

**Opening responses:**

Peace on each one who comes in need,  
PEACE ON EACH ONE WHO COMES IN JOY.  
Peace on each one who offers prayers,  
PEACE ON EACH ONE WHO OFFERS SONG.  
Peace of the Maker, Peace of the Son,  
PEACE OF THE SPIRIT, THE TRIUNE ONE.

**Collect:**

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered by your Holy Spirit into one, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

**Prayer:**

O God, for your love for us, warm and brooding,  
which has brought us to birth and opened our eyes  
to the wonder and beauty of creation,

WE GIVE YOU THANKS.

For your love for us, wild and freeing,  
which has awakened us to the energy of creation:  
to the sap that flows,  
the blood that pulses,  
the heart that sings.

WE GIVE YOU THANKS.

For your love for us, compassionate and patient,  
which has carried us through our pain,  
wept beside us in our sin,  
and waited with us in our confusion.

WE GIVE YOU THANKS.

For your love for us, strong and challenging,  
which has called us to risk for you,  
asked for the best in us,  
and shown us how to serve.

WE GIVE YOU THANKS.

O God we come to celebrate  
that your Holy Spirit is present deep within us,  
and at the heart of all life.

Forgive us when we forget your gift of love  
made known to us in Jesus,  
and draw us into your presence. Amen

**Word of God:**

**Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22**

7:1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther.

7:2 On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

7:3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people -- that is my request.

7:4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."

7:5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?"

7:6 Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

7:9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that."

7:10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

9:20 Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far,

9:21 enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year,

9:22 as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

## **Psalm 124**

124:1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side -- let Israel now say --

124:2 if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,

124:3 then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;

124:4 then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;

124:5 then over us would have gone the raging waters.

124:6 Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

124:7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

124:8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

## **James 5:13-20**

5:13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

5:14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

5:15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

5:17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

5:18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

5:19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,

5:20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

### **Mark 9:38-50**

9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

9:39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

9:40 Whoever is not against us is for us.

9:41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

9:42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

9:43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

9:45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

9:47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,

9:48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

9:49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.

9:50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

### **Sermon**

Let us pray,

Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be guided, blessed and inspired by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week Helena reminded us that we are "God's people," and it was good to hear it proclaimed so clearly and with such certainty. It touched me personally because

that tiny statement has had a powerful effect in sustaining me and bringing me strength many times in my life. Knowing all of us are God's people is a powerful source of hope, and peace, and perseverance for each one of us. Please remind yourself of that and think of it often.

Today in our gospel reading we are reminded that although we are 'God's people' we are also one hundred percent human. No more and less. Part and parcel of being human is to encounter temptation, and at times to stumble, and to fail and to fall. My guess is that every one of us could tell stories about the temptations in our lives. Who or what temptations has been a stumbling block for you; who or what temptation has been a stumbling block for me. Perhaps there are quite a few. Some of them teach us lessons. The big ones we remember as clear-as-day. Some of them so big we can feel changed by them or because of them.

Today's gospel tells a story about John and the other disciples running into a stumbling block, an outsider, who, as John tells Jesus, "Was not following us." John does not say this fellow was interfering with the disciples' work; that he had a different purpose; or even that he opposed them. He simply says, "He was not following us." Never mind he was casting out demons in Jesus' name. He was not one of them, and that seemed to be their complaint.

Now we do not know what the temptation might have been for John and the others, nevertheless whatever it was, they felt threatened. I do know however, that today we are often tempted to feel threatened by others. By the ones who do not look or dress like us, do not speak or act like us; the other who does not think or believe like us; the other who does not do it our way. He, she, or maybe even they, are not fitting in with us; not following us.

The offender in this story was casting out demons, alleviating oppression, and offering a new life, all in the name of Jesus. Which seems good. But chances are this man was getting a name, status, and recognition among the people. Maybe he was stealing some of the spotlight, some of the disciples' security. So John and the others thought to put an end to this fellow's 'deeds of power'-- apparently without success.

If we are honest, isn't that what we often do, or want to do, with our stumbling blocks. We draw lines in the sand, circle the wagons, divide into us and them; and try to stop them. We see this very thing happening more and more in the world today. I read and watch the news. I try to follow a little of the politics. So many commentators say the same thing...we are becoming more and more divided. Amid all of this I am painfully aware that I have been, at times, too much like John. Maybe you can say the same.

Jesus teaches us today to take a different approach. He erases the line and enlarges the circle. He isn't so concerned about another who causes us to stumble. His concern is focused on us.

Jesus' message is twofold.

First, whether we have become a stumbling block to another "to one of these little ones"—and that, I believe, is not just little children but includes anyone who is beginning his or her faith journey; anyone who is considering and exploring a spiritual life; anyone whose faith is newly forming, growing, and preciously fragile—these are the little ones.

Secondly, whether we have become a stumbling block to ourselves.

Jesus is once again asking us to look at ourselves, to be self-reflective. It's as if he was saying to John, 'Don't worry about that other one. You worry about yourself.' He's asking us to look within. Jesus is advising that the greatest stumbling blocks are not on the outside but are within us. Things like anger and revenge; the unfounded judgments we make of others; prejudice; our desire to get ahead at the expense of others; the need to be right; our unwillingness to listen more than we speak; the assumption that we know more and better than another; living as if our way is the only right way; pride, fear, being exclusionary; our desire for power and control. Need I go on? These and a hundred other temptations are what can cause us to fall right into sin.

So in what ways have you and I become an obstacle to ourselves or to another? That's the unspoken question in today's gospel. When have we caused another to trip and fail and fall? When have we tripped and stumbled over our own inner temptations?

And it doesn't end there. I believe we are to not only look at individual stumbling blocks but to those even greater obstacles that are systemic. For example, in the ways the legal system obstructs justice for all. In the ways our free-market economy is a barrier to the poor and disadvantaged. In the ways the Church is a hindrance to Jesus and the life he offers the world. In the ways you and I have participated in and perpetuated these and other systemic stumbling blocks.

This is neither an easy nor comfortable conversation, and none of us like it much, in part because it puts the onus on us. It is hard work. But it's work about which Jesus is adamant. You can hear that in the images he uses: drowning by millstone, the amputation of hand or foot, the torn out eyeball, the unquenchable fire, hell and the worm that never dies. We do not take these images literally, but we do need to take the message seriously.

Jesus uses these images, not to scare us but to talk about our betterment. “It is better for you” he says. That’s what this work is about. Jesus wants us to be better. Jesus doesn’t want us to be stumbling blocks to others, or ourselves. And friends I don’t think you want to be either. As Jesus said, “be at peace with one another” and that begins with looking at ourselves.

What might we need to change or give up in order to step into our better selves? Better as individuals, as a community and perhaps most importantly as church. I don’t know about you but to me this all sounds good, yet at the same time, incredibly overwhelming. Where oh where do we start?

The story from Esther gives us a perspective. One woman by refusing to give into the temptation of wealth, an unimaginable amount of wealth and power, saved the lives of others. Think how easy it would have been for her to ignore the plight of the community, to never reveal to the King that she was a Jew, and to live the rest of her life in the lap-of-luxury. The temptation would have been intense and must have caused her some sleepless nights. But she prevailed! And an entire community was saved because of one single person’s resistance to temptation! Inspiration indeed.

In a week or two it is expected a refugee family will be making Grafton their new home. We don’t yet have the details but we have been asked to assist this family. They may very well look different than us, they might dress differently than us, and they certainly will have a different language capacity than us. But just like us they are completely human and they could use help, guidance and friendship. They will need community.

There will be very many changes and challenges for them. Things will be different and unsettling—our cold winters might just be one a big one. So friends can we avoid the temptation to leave them on their own, or worse, shun them? I think we can come together to help this family; to anticipate their needs—the everyday things they will need to know—like where to buy food, where to find medicine and medical help, how to open a bank account, how to get internet service, where to find a vehicle, and so on. This is an opportunity calling us to enlarge our circle, to include, to be the better people Jesus asks us to be. We have an opportunity to show what it means to be God’s people. Let us take inspiration from Esther. Yes we are a small group, but we could make a very positive impact. We could help change life for this family in the name of Jesus. Let’s get to work!

May God bless us all. Amen.

**Prayer:**

We bring to God,  
someone whom we have met or remembered today  
and for whom we want to pray;  
For those facing the challenges of chronic illness: Renate, Carla, Fred, Jim  
For those celebrating birthdays:  
For those celebrating Anniversaries:

We bring to God,  
someone who is hurting and needs our prayer;  
For Pat Zatylny, diagnosed with stage four cancer and for her family in Saskatchewan  
Those who continue to mourn the death of a spouse  
Those who are living through instability and facing challenges

We bring to God,  
a troubled situation in our world  
Victims of Residential Schools and actions of reconciliation and healing  
The Hungry and Homeless and actions for a living income and secure housing  
For the continuing challenges presented by Covid 19 and the Variants

We bring to God,  
someone whom we find hard to forgive or trust

We bring ourselves to God,  
that we might grow in generosity of spirit,  
clarity of mind,  
and the warmth of affection.

**Closing responses:**

O Trinity of Love,  
You have been with us at the world's beginning,  
BE WITH US TILL THE WORLD'S END.

You have been with us at our life's shaping,  
BE WITH US AT OUR LIFE'S END.

You have been with us at the sun's rising,  
BE WITH US TILL THE DAY'S END.

AMEN.



**Blessing:**

This is the day that God has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing.

Go in peace to love and to serve; we will seek peace and pursue it.

In the name of the Trinity of Love,

God in Community, Holy and one.

Amen