

Council of Churches
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Theme: "Do good; seek justice."

Isaiah 1:12-18

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My dear friends and relatives in Christ, I thank you for your gracious invitation to speak today. I count it an honour and a blessing to be gifted with this time with you.

The theme for our worship is "Do good; seek justice." which comes from a powerful passage from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 1, verses 12-18. In these verses, the prophet Isaiah speaks directly to the people of Israel, and his words are just as relevant and powerful today as they were thousands of years ago.

Isaiah begins by reminding the people that they have turned away from God and are engaging in religious practices that are unacceptable to him. They bring their sacrifices and offerings to the temple, but these acts are meaningless because they are accompanied by wickedness and injustice. God is not pleased with their hypocrisy. He calls them to repentance, saying, "When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." (Isaiah 1:15)

This is a dire message for us as churches today. For there is much for which we need to repent, and religious rituals may shield our shame but not our sin before God. All around, there is injustice: discrimination and violence based on race, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status; unequal access to housing and healthcare; human rights violations; abuse of power in government and corporate sectors; environmental injustice and the destruction of the planet; systemic violence and genocide

of the First Peoples of the Land, and sadly, the examples go on and on. Our sins are many, and they are "like scarlet."

As a Christian and religious leader, I am constantly learning to listen to God in the diverse voices outside the stain-glass fishbowl that is the institutional church. I recall writing a pastoral letter in May of 2021 after the discovery of the mass graves of indigenous children in Kamloops, British Columbia. I wrote in my letter that I was "shocked to hear the tragic news of this horrible discovery." I soon received a message from an indigenous member of my church who wondered why I was "shocked" by the truth that the indigenous community had been shouting for years, but no one would listen. I confess my unintentional unawareness that injustice can also be blind and deaf. I was ignorant of these shouts for justice because those shouting were not in my purview of an inherited position of colonial privilege. I needed to educate myself before I could do anything at all.

As God says in Isaiah, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes." Unless we ourselves are willing to see and fully listen to all victims pleading for justice and to remove the sin of personal bias, these shouts will often go unnoticed and unheard.

But God's message is not one of condemnation alone. He also offers a path to redemption and restoration. He calls the people to turn away from their sins, act justly, help the oppressed, and defend the rights of the orphan and the widow. God says, "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." (Isaiah 1:17)

As Churches, our task is a prophetic one. It is not our role to remain silent, for when injustice is ignored, our hands are full of blood, as Isaiah has said. We work for justice when God's will is done on earth, as it is in heaven. We have examples of this through our collaboration in community service and outreach: such as food banks or homeless shelters. Churches must engage in advocacy and lobbying efforts to address issues of injustice at various levels. Churches must also work with community groups to amplify

their voices and build broader movements for justice. The work of justice is the work of God.

It is sad when the divisions between us get in the way of being a voice for the voiceless that are desperate to be heard. When we put our external differences ahead of an internal call to do good and seek justice, we are part of the problem. As we have heard and confessed at the beginning of this liturgy, "We need God's grace to overcome our divisions and to address systems and structures that have contributed to the fracturing of our communities." Perhaps a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity needs to become a daily commitment to work with God and one another.

When we repent and seek to live according to God's will, God promises to forgive our sins and restore us to a right relationship with God and each other. As Isaiah says, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

This passage from Isaiah is a powerful reminder of the importance of living a righteous and just life. It calls us to turn away from our sins and to seek to live by God's will. It reminds us that a commitment to justice and righteousness must accompany our religious practices. And it offers us hope and the promise of forgiveness and restoration when we turn to God in repentance.

As Martin Luther King wrote from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama:
"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."
(Letter from Birmingham, Alabama jail, April 16, 1963)

Let us take these words to heart, and may we all strive to live lives pleasing to God, filled with justice and righteousness, so that we, too, may experience the promise of forgiveness and restoration. Amen.