



Wildwood
Mennonite
Church

"Rules, Rules, Rules..."

Wildwood Mennonite Church // August 29, 2021

Worship Leader: Ben B // Music Leader: Lois M // Sermon: Josephine Kroeker

Welcome to Wildwood!

Good morning and welcome to worship this Sunday morning. We are gathered this Sunday – here at the end of August already. I was reflecting the other day on how long since it's been since we've gathered in person. I was sharing with Eileen a couple of weeks ago about how my entire rhythm of worship – my Sunday morning ritual – is thrown off.

Getting up in the morning. Coffee. Breakfast. Listening to music in the car on the way to church. Visiting with friends. Participating in worship. Post worship snack and coffee. Lunch with friends.

I lament that this has been gone. However, this time of separation has also been an opportunity, an invitation to reframe how we think about our worship, and how we think about our relationship with our creator.

Today Josephine will be bringing us a message that touches a little bit on this. Wrestling with this idea of how we tend to put a God that transcends space, place, and time into finite containers to help make sense of God. We thank Josephine for this gift today.

I also want to thank the others involved in worship today. Lois for her focus on the music. Jenny for the children's story. Phyllis and Les for their involvement with Zoom. Also I would like to thank and welcome back Sarah for her work in ensuring this all comes together – so that we can come together as a church family.

Music for Meditation // [Be Not Afraid](#) // Cat Jahnke

Call to Worship // Voices Together #855

Voice 1: To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars,
before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand.

**Voice 2: To worship is to be silent, receptive,
before a tree astir with the wind, or the passing shadow of a cloud.**

Voice 1: To worship is to work with dedication and with skill;
it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music.

**Voice 2: To worship is to sing with the singing beauty of the earth;
it is to listen through a storm to the still small voice within.**

All: *Worship is the mystery within us
 reaching out to the Mystery beyond.*

Peace Candle

As we light our peace candles this morning, I want to share this prayer for Afghanistan put together by MCC.

[*A Prayer for Afghanistan*](#)

God of safe passage, open the way.

God of hospitality, prepare rooms to receive.

God of protection, envelop those in danger.

God of peace, remove the seed and tools of violence.

God of tears, hold us in your embrace.

Oh, Afghanistan!

May peace flow down like cooling rain.

Amen

Sharing Time

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. Sharing items can be emailed to the church office or the pastors to be shared with the congregation. If you're able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven't heard from this week.

Congregational Prayer // Voices Together #996

Leader: Listening God,

All: *you hear our prayers before we speak
 yet welcome our praying;
 therefore we come with confidence
 to lay our requests before you.*

Leader: We pray for Christians everywhere,
 for our denomination and congregation,
 for strength to persevere in faithfulness.


We pray for the whole people of God.

People: **God of grace, hear our prayer.**

Leader: We pray for the nations of the world,
 for all leaders,
 and for those who make policy decisions.
We pray for the well-being of our global community.

People: **God of grace, hear our prayer.**





Leader: We pray for the earth and all living creatures,
for regions and species at risk,
and for the sharing of resources.
We pray for the wholeness of creation.

People: God of grace, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for those who are overcome by violence,
for victims of injustice or oppression,
and for those in poverty or pain.
We pray for all who need healing and peace.

People: God of grace, hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for those who endure trials,
for those who are dying,
and for those who mourn.
We pray for all in need of comfort and hope.

People: God of grace, hear our prayer.

Leader: You have heard the prayers of your people, O God.
We rest in the comfort of your care,
as we pray in Jesus' name.

All: Amen

Song // [Praise to the Living God](#) // Voices Together #204

Children's Story // [Click here for video storytime with Jenny B!](#)

This week's story is [Why Do I Have to Eat Off the Floor?](#) By Chris Hornsey with illustration by Gwyn Perkins.

Scripture // *The Inclusive Bible Translation*

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which Yhwh, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of Yhwh, your God, you must not add to nor subtract from that which I am giving to you.

Observe them carefully, and demonstrate your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of these statutes and say, "Surely this is a wise and intelligent people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as Yhwh is to us when we call? Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole Law that I set before

you today? Take care and be diligent in guarding yourselves, that you do not forget those things which your own eyes have seen. Do not forget them as long as you live, and teach them to your children and your children's children.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Pharisees and some of the religious scholars who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. They had noticed that some of the disciples were eating with unclean hands—that is, without ritually washing them. For the Pharisees, and Jewish people in general, follow the tradition of their ancestors and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow. Moreover, they never eat anything from the market without first sprinkling it. There are many other traditions which have been handed down to them, such as the washing of cups and pots and dishes.

So these Pharisees and religious scholars asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of our ancestors, but eat their food with unclean hands?”

Jesus answered, “How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites when he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.

The worship they offer me is worthless; the doctrines they teach are only human precepts.’

You disregard God’s commandments and cling to human traditions.”

Jesus summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand. Nothing that enters us from the outside makes us impure; it is what comes out of us that makes us impure.


For it is from within—from our hearts—that evil intentions emerge: promiscuity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, obscenity, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evils come from within and make us impure.”

Sermon // “Rules, Rules, Rules...” // Josephine Kroeker

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))

I would like to begin with a quote from Richard Rohr which I think speaks nicely to the Deuteronomy passage, where Moses is reminding the people of the commandments that have been given to them by their God in such a unique, intimate way.





“When Moses effusively praises the “statutes and the decrees” that must be “observed,” that must “not slip from your memory, but be taught to your children’s children,” we educated and progressive types just roll our eyes and wait for the next reading. But then we have Jesus, who is seldom wrong but “might just be” in this case, saying that he has no intention of “abolishing the law, or even the smallest letter of the law”—“until its purpose is achieved.” What is going on here? We are not interested in going back to repressive and narrow notions of religion, are we? Maybe this can help:

“Great Contents must be held by smaller holding tanks. There is really no other way, or we utterly inflate and destroy the human psyche and soul. It is only a very proud person, or a proud culture, who would think differently. You can only get Great Contents little by little, in stages and doses, when ready, and when you yourself are at the deeper levels. Otherwise, you always get burned! Laws, dogmas, even institutions, “statutes and decrees” are the necessary holding tanks, keeping you still and struggling in one place, until you can go deeper, and know what they really mean!”
—Richard Rohr


A cup filled with water can nourish a person. Sustain them. Enliven them. Imagine that this person holding the cup of water might think to themselves, “This cup is too small, too constraining.” They dump the water on the floor, discarding the cup, or even going so far as to break the cup in the name of freedom. But now the water, on the floor, becomes harder to access in terms of quenching their thirst, even becoming a hazard for slipping & falling, with the added danger of shards of glass.

This can be where we slip up when we strive for “freedom” in our lives. Boundaries—which sometimes come in the form of rules, laws, practices, disciplines, and beliefs—may not always feel like freedom, but they are essential to a balanced, healthy life with God. Like the glass that is needed to hold the water. When we experience God & their love for us, a boundary—or container—is essential in order to ground us in that experience.

Brené Brown talks a lot about boundaries & has a great definition for them: boundaries delineate between what is okay & what is not okay. Pretty simple, right? But whose boundaries are we using? When developing communal boundaries—like those in a church community—things get tangled pretty quickly.

I want to read a passage from *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* by Nadia Bolz-Weber that I hope will be a helpful illustration on what can happen when we go about the work of setting communal boundaries.

“The plane took off, and I looked out the window. We were traveling over the dry plains of eastern Colorado, thirty thousand feet above a dot matrix of green and brown circles that revealed the geometry of industrial agriculture. As a city girl who doesn’t know a thing about farming, I’ve always found those green circles puzzling. Why would farmers plant circles of crops in lots that are square?”



“When I looked into it later, I discovered that in 1940, just twenty-nine miles from the spot where my plane made its way into the crisp Colorado sky, a man named Frank Zybach invented the center-pivot irrigation system, essentially revolutionizing farming in America. In his system, the watering equipment turns on a pivot, allowing sprinklers to water crops in a circular pattern. The crops aren’t planted in circles, they’re just watered that way. The water never gets to the crops in the corners.”

...

“The day after I returned home, I sat on the edge of the stage at House for All Sinners and Saints, the Denver church I pastor. My parishioner Meghan and I were watching the church’s monthly community meal take place.”

...

“Meghan, a large trans woman with long, thin hair and a face and figure that she admits do not allow her to “pass”, [passing means people assume your gender correctly based on your gender presentation] has enough social anxiety to make sitting at a communal table a non-starter, so she usually makes her own place on the edge of the stage. Some Sundays, rather than join the fray, I hang with her and talk comic books.


“That day, as our legs hung off the stage, I brought up something that had been on my mind lately. “Hey Meghan, I read my old Christian sex-ed book this morning for the first time in maybe forty years.” She laughed, and I went on. “It taught me that God’s plan is for everyone to be a heterosexual, cisgender Christian who never has sex with anyone until they marry their one true love and make babies”

“We both laughed. Then I shook my head. “I mean, I do think there are genuinely those kinds of people out there...”

“Meghan held up her hand and touched her thumb to the rest of her purple nail-polished fingers. “Sure there are. And this is how small that circle is.” “If you were to draw a circle that represents all the people on the planet, and then inside it draw another small circle to represent the people who live according to “God’s plan,” then, well, very few people on the planet fit into that circle. Meghan doesn’t fit into that circle. I don’t fit into that circle. Also not included in the circle are divorced people, people in unhappy marriages, people who have sex before marriage, people who masturbate, asexuals, gay people, bisexuals, people who are not Christian, people who are gender non-binary...”

“If that’s “God’s plan,” then God planned poorly.

“Maybe you don’t fit into that circle, either. God planted so many of us in the corners, yet the center-pivot irrigation of the church’s teachings about sex and sexuality tends to exclude us.”



I appreciate this irrigation metaphor—here we are talking about water again!—because it illustrates so well the danger of an ethic too narrow for a community. As she says, so many of us are planted by God—who made us in their image in beautiful varieties—outside of what we as the church have upheld as “God’s plan” or “God’s boundaries” for many generations.

So I suppose one question we could ask is “Who does this boundary serve?” when beginning to discern between God’s love & human boundaries.

When we—who are finite beings—experience the presence of God—who is infinite—we can only experience the parts of God’s presence that we are ready to receive. That readiness depends on where we are in our journey of faith. We might start with an understanding of marriage that involves a man & a woman, for better or worse, till death do us part, yada yada... But then someone in our church gets divorced. What do we do with that? We might struggle at first, “But the Bible says...”, etc. Maybe we come to an understanding of marriage & relationships that allows for the nuances of divorce, that expands the boundaries to include those people as well. Then a gay couple begins attending our church... then a trans woman... then... Oh gosh, what is happening?!

Sometimes our readiness is our own desire to expand our welcome to God’s myriad children; sometimes God nudges us to expand our welcome. It’s not usually easy, simple, “set in stone”, “cut & dried” or any phrase that accompanies the “my work here is done” hand gesture.

Which brings us back to today’s scriptures. We have Moses expounding the values of the statutes & decrees of YHWH in Deuteronomy, then we have Jesus decrying the performative faith of rituals & human institutions... so, who’s right?!

Well, both, in their own ways. As we’ve already been discussing, disciplines, rules, “statutes and decrees”: all have a purpose in our relationship with an infinite God.

But—to switch metaphors, briefly—these rules and disciplines are the wineskins, not the wine. They are not sacred in & of themselves, nor are they static. We must always hold to these human instituted laws/rules/ institutions/structures loosely, with open hands, not clenched. Otherwise we run the risk of honouring God with our lips while our hearts are far from them.

The challenge for us is to discern the boundary between wine & wineskin; where does the cup end & the water begin? I will not pretend to offer a tried & true route through this kind of discernment. But I do know that God calls us to love, above all, before any rule, tenet, or institution. Love comes first. Jesus consistently modelled that, right up to his death. & I do think that prayer & community conversations are some of the tools for this journey.

May God go with us.

Song of Response // [My Love Colours Outside the Lines](#) // Voices Together #582

Offering Prayer // Voices Together #1017

God of life,
we give these offerings in gratitude,
rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.
We give these offerings in faith,
trusting that you will provide for our needs.
We give these offerings in hope,
knowing you can use them to spread your love in the world.
And with these offerings, we give ourselves;
may we live with generous hearts and open hands.
Amen.

Sending Song // [In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful](#) // Voices Together #118

Benediction

Wildwood family:

Go into the week embracing the mystery of our creator.

Go into the week ready to witness the awesome wonder of our creator working and moving in ways unimaginable – breaking the confines of our understanding.

Go into the week assured that God is with us in all spaces, places and time.

Amen

