

(organ music) (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- Let us pray. God of mercy, we gather in this hour of worship praising Your name and seeking to understand Your will. Empower us to know what is so valuable in life that it is worth all we have and all we are. Grant us discernment to see You at work for good, even when events around us seem dark or forboding. Nourish us in covenant and set our hearts free to rejoice in Christ's way. Amen.

- Let us pray together the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we may hear your message with joy this day. Amen. This reading is taken from the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, starting with verse twenty seven. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with size too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the same according to the will of God. We all know that all things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose, for those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son in order that he might be the first born within a large family. And those whom He predestines He also called and those whom He called, He also justifies. And those whom He justified, he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold His own son, but gave Him up for all of us, will He not with Him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies, who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yet who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? As it is written, for your sake we are being killed all day long, we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. Knowing all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus, our Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thank you, God.

- Today's Psalm is number one hundred and five, verses one through eleven, found on page eight twenty eight in the hymnal. Please stand and sing the Gloria responsively. (organ plays) ♪ Oh, give thanks to the Lord ♪ ♪ Call on God's name ♪ ♪ Make known God's deeds among all peoples ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Glory in God's holy name ♪ ♪ Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Remember the wonderful works God has done ♪ ♪ The miracle and judgment God has uttered ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ The Lord is our God ♪ ♪ Whose judgements are in all the earth ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ The covenant made Abraham ♪ ♪ His promise won to Isaac ♪ ♪ And confirmed to Jacob as a statute ♪ ♪ To his realized and everlasting covenant saying ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ All glory be to You, Creator ♪ ♪ And to Jesus Christ our Savior ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ As it was our time began ♪ (congregation sings) Please be seated. (organ

plays) (choir sings)

- This reading is taken from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, beginning with verse thirty three. He told them another parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed it with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone found and hid. Then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. When it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. Have you understood all that? They answered: yes. This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thank you, God.

- Thy kingdom come Thy kingdom come, that is what Jesus has taught us to pray, we shall pray that as we always do each Sunday, before the service ends, "Thy kingdom come." And let's say that then that's why we're all here this morning, is that we're all becoming part of God's Kingdom, we're here because we're looking for the Kingdom, we're becoming part of the Kingdom. Thy Kingdom come. And yet, the Kingdom's coming must be something that is not self evident, that isn't easy to see. Or else, why would Jesus have spent so much time teaching about the Kingdom? You see this in Matthew's thirteenth chapter. The thirteenth chapter of Matthew begins with Matthew saying he taught them many things in parables and they're all parables about the Kingdom. The Kingdom must be weird, not easily seen because Jesus had to tell so many stories about it. The Kingdom of God, well a kingdom is like it's like a man that goes out and sows seeds, he throws seed. And most of the seed falls on bad ground and it does not take root. But, a small minority of the seed falls on good earth and produces great results. And those of us who are gathered here on this summer Sunday in July, there not all that many of us here, not as many as there is at some times of the year. Not many as are were gathered last night at Walnut Grove or Walnut Creek or whatever it is. We're just a minority and so we like that parable because it says don't worry about that. Don't worry, the Kingdom of God doesn't need a crowd. It just needs a few faithful seeds that bare rich harvest, from the small to the great. Jesus follows that with another parable, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tiny little mustard seed, very small. But yet when that seed germinates and takes fruit it produces a great plant. And because we're small, we take heart. Most of the citizens of Durham, they're on vacation, you could have been on vacation, you could've slept in late, but no, you've come down here to be part of the Kingdom. Just a few of you, that's okay Jesus says, that's the way God works, just the small to the large, take heart. And one can imagine what a comfort these parables were for the disciples. See them there, there were only twelve of them, squatting around in a circle in the dust, listening to Jesus teach about the Kingdom. Former fishermen, ex IRS agents called to come be part of the Kingdom, but they took heart, because that's the way God works, just with a few. Those who the world considers of small and of low account, that's okay. In God's eyes there can be great harvest. And then he says: The Kingdom... The Kingdom is like a woman that takes some leaven and she hides it in a big lump of dough and that little bit of yeast transforms the whole amount of dough, it leavens the whole lump. That's the Kingdom. And that sounds good to us again, sounds reminiscent of the parable of the seeds. From the small we move to the great, God works through just the

minority, just an elect few to produce the Kingdom. I love Thy Kingdom, Lord we sing, the church of Thine abode. God works through the twelve disciples, the chosen few on a Sunday morning, the elect, this is where God dwells, we love that. And yet, even though that may be the point about the parables of the sowing of the seed and the mustard seed, it is doubtful that is the point of the parable of the woman and the yeast and the dough. Because, in that part of the world in that day, yeast was an exclusively negative image. If you look through scripture where leaven appears, it is always in a negative light. Paul disgusted with the church at Corinth for letting a few bad apples spoil the whole barrel, says to them: do you not know that just a little leaven ruins the whole lump? That's the way they looked upon leaven in the Bible. Leaven was an image of decay and corruption and spoilage, because when you hear this word leaven, you're not to think about yeast pre-packaged, domesticated yeast like we buy in the grocery store today. You're to think leaven, of the near eastern variety. The way you leavened bread then was you took a pinch from the dough, a pinch of that raw dough and you stuck it in a pot and you put it over to the side of the room and you left it. And there it did what dough does when it is left out like that, it rots, it becomes covered over with a green mold. It begins to smell. The yeast transforms that into a kind of smelly, putrefied lump. Later, when you wanted to leaven bread you would take a pinch of that leavening and you would mix it in with your dough and it would infect the whole lump and that's the way leavened bread was made. That smelly, green molded lump of leaven, that's what we're talking about. No wonder that in Israel it was not permitted to have any leaven bread in the house during the holy days of Passover. That is why Leviticus says you cannot offer leavened bread up at the temple, at the alter. And that is why in a couple of places Paul warns the church, just a little leaven will ruin the whole lump. Purification, rot, decay, that's leaven. And Jesus says that's the way the Kingdom of God happens sometimes. It's an image we do not expect, it's a shock to know that the Kingdom comes the Kingdom comes through ways that we find offensive. I very well remember a professor of mine, a distinguished professor of Christian ethics, James Gustafson. In one of his lectures on Christian ethics, telling us about an episode that happened to him back in the nineteen fifties in midtown Manhattan. He'd been working late into the night on some scholarly project with a colleague and it was a hot night and they decided to walk out on the streets of Manhattan to go for some refreshment. And they went to this bar and in the bar they noticed there was a young soldier who had had too much to drink. And he ordered another drink and he paid for the drink with a twenty dollar bill. And Gustafson said that his observant colleague noted that the bartender gave him five dollars in change. So, his colleague gets up, he goes over to the bartender and he says: give him the rest of his money. And the bartender raises a terrible ruckus and says, I don't know what you're talking about and there was an argument ensued. But he finally opened up his cash drawer and he gave the drunken soldier the rest of his change. He said not because that was what he should have done, but to keep peace in the bar. The colleague sat back down, they resumed their discussion. He noticed that the young man became more drunk and eventually passed out. So, his colleague gets up, goes over, opens up the young mans wallet there on the table, he finds out that he lives in Long Island. So, he says to Gustafson, come on. They help the young man out of the bar, they hail a taxi and then his colleague takes out twenty dollars out of the wallet and writes a note telling the young man what they've done, he puts the note back in the wallet. Then he carefully notes the name of the cab driver, the number of the cab so that they can check on it later. He gives the cabbie the address in Long Island and they send him on his way. Now, Gustafson says the thing that impressed him about that episode was that his colleague, the one who had performed this rather extraordinary ethical action was in no way a religious man. In fact, he had heard him ridicule clergy and the church and Christians on a number of occasions. And

yet that man had behaved in a more ethical, more Christian way even than those of us who self identify ourselves as Christians. Do you know how frightening, how threatening a story like that is to a Christian ethicist? So threatening that when Gustafson later wrote his book *Can Ethics Be Christian?* He included that story at the beginning of the book. It had so impressed him. And maybe the elect don't like to hear a story like that after we've gotten out of bed on a July and we've come down here and we've gathered in the church just us and the Kingdom. Maybe we don't like to know that the Kingdom of God is busy breaking out in ways that are not part of our ways. The parable is even more surprising. Not only is this leaven an image of putrefaction and of decay and smelly negativity, but it's surprising in that it's a woman who is busy making this bread. Of the seven parables in Matthew's thirteenth chapter, only one features a woman as an agent of the Kingdom. A woman. And isn't it ironic that this woman who in the eastern society is pushed over in the corner and over to the side, considered small and helpless and of no account. She is busy working with the leaven that has been pushed over to the side. She is the agent of the Kingdom. And what's more interesting the words in the Greek are that she, she doesn't just mix the yeast, she doesn't just sort of work it into the dough. Jesus says she hides it in the dough. She puts it in, she just hides it in there. Using the same word that He's used in another parable where He talked about that little steward that took his one talent, wrapped it in a napkin and then he hid it out in the back yard. Just like a thief would hide his loot. It's a weird word, you don't expect it to appear in the kitchen, she's busy hiding that. And then, it's also odd that He says she takes some leaven and she mixed it in three measures of flour. You know how much three measures of flour is? That's a bushel of flour. The Kingdom of God comes when a woman presumably a rather healthy woman with large biceps, mixes a bushel of flour, that will make enough bread to feed a hundred people. From this woman out on the margins, this no account person, taking this despised yeast, is going to feed the whole neighborhood. Transform a bunch of hungry people. That's the Kingdom, Jesus says. It's not what we came here expecting to hear. It's not, it's odd, we're assaulted by these discordant images of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God breaks out in ways you can't control and you don't name. Among people who aren't gathered here, it's just breaking out all over them. We don't define the Kingdom, God defines the Kingdom. The Kingdom comes as a work of God, not through our self identified righteous efforts. It's a shock, I tell you. The Kingdom of God is like a woman that took some leaven and she hid it in all this dough and it transformed a bunch of people. Well, in my last church, we decided that we needed to evangelize. We needed to get some new members, translated that means we don't have enough people to make the budget keep a roof over our head, bring in some more people. And so, we got into church growth and we studied evangelism and we were told to have a neighborhood canvas. You go out on a Sunday afternoon, you start knocking on doors, you leave a little pamphlet and you tell them about our church, about our programs and then you hope some will come. Now, I was there at the training session and Mary and Gladys were clearly told you go down Summit Drive and then you take a, you're gonna have two blocks and take a right and then you hand out your pamphlets. I was there when they were told, they were handed a map and the map said go down Summit Drive take a right. But Mary and Gladys in their earlier lives had been elementary school teachers before they retired, this meant that they were better at giving orders than receiving orders. And so, they walked down Summit Drive and they took a left. They took a left, they got into the projects. And there they were evangelizing the wrong neighborhood. And at the end of the day, when every body came back to report on their results, Mary and Gladys said we only had one person who said she was interested in visiting our church. Somebody named Laverne, she lives down there in a two room apartment with her two kids. She said she'd like to come, we invited her to the Wednesday morning

women's Bible study. And I said we told you to turn right, what were you doing down there? Anyway, Wednesday morning Gladys shows up with Laverne, Laverne's got her a Bible, she'd never had a Bible before, never seen a Bible but Gladys got her a Bible, it was a black Bible, it had her name engraved in gold letters and she was so proud of that Bible. And she brought that Bible in to the Bible study and I was leading the Bible study that morning and it was on temptation, we were studying from the fourth chapter of Luke about the Jesus temptations and I talked about how Jesus, when confronted by Satan, had resisted temptation, he'd stood up, he resisted that temptation. And then I said to the women gathered there, have any of you ever had to resist temptation? Someone spoke up and she said yes, last week I was at the supermarket and I was buying groceries and there was this confusion at the checkout line, next thing I know I was standing out in the parking lot with a loaf of bread I hadn't paid for. And I thought to myself, what the heck. The supermarket can afford it, I'll just keep this bread, but then I thought no, no, no, wait, wait, wait. You're a Christian, I went back into that supermarket and I paid for that bread. I said, well good, good. That's resisting temptation, good that's fine. Anyone else? Laverne spoke up. She said, when I was living with a guy a couple of years ago, not the guy that's the father of my children, but another guy, one of the first guys I was living with, we were into heroin really big, you know what that's stuff's like, gets in your head, you go crazy. You know what it's like, anyway. One day he talked me into holding up this gas station, we went in there we held up this gas station and we got about two hundred and fifty dollars that Saturday night, it was just as easy as taking candy from a baby. Two days later, he says he has his eye on this convenience store he wants to hold up. He wants me to hold it up with him. And I don't know, there was just something, something in me said I'm not gonna do it. I hold up that gas station, I'm not gonna hold up that convenience store. I said no and he beat the hell outta me, but I said no, it felt good to say no. It was the first time I had ever said no. And I think that was kinda like resisting temptation. And I said, okay I think we're ready for our prayer time now. When I was standing out in the parking lot, helping Gladys get into her Pluma, she said: you know your Bible studies used to be dull. I'm gonna get home, I think I can get a crowd for this, I'm gonna call some people. When He got through with all the stories, Jesus said to His disciples, have you understood all of this? Have you understood what I told you about the Kingdom and the disciples said, yeah, yeah we understand, yeah we got it, we understand. They lied. Amen. (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- The Lord be with you

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh, Sovereign God. As we turn to you in prayer this day, we confess to the times we have been offended by your Gospel. Jesus catches us off guard as He describes the kind of kingdom You sent Him to proclaim, rather than the one we would choose to hear about. Yet, even as we draw back in surprise and sometimes distaste, we humbly confess that more often we have offended You for our failure to understand. We have not trusted that something small could grow into something great. We have not noticed the treasure hidden in our midst. We have not sold everything in order to obtain the pearl of great price. Forgive us our shallowness, expand our vision and open our hearts and minds to fresh understandings of those things we thought we understood but in reality have glimpsed only the faintest shadow of. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Redeeming God, we pray for all those who offend us. Perpetrators of violence, substance abusers, those who cheat or deceive us, convicted criminals of any sort, anyone we would call

enemy. We acknowledge that you have created a world in which the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Likewise, you call us into a kingdom where the weeds and the wheat grow together with you as our final judge. Teach us how to love our enemies and pray for those whom we call undesirable. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Creating God, we pray for all those who've grown and prevail under the burden of the cruelties of nature. For those men, women and children who are without homes, farms, businesses and the necessities of life along the banks of the Mississippi river and its tributaries. We pray for sunny skies, grant them courage perseverance and hope in the face of overwhelming circumstances and empower us to reach out to them in their need. We pray also for any who suffer in other regions due to lack of rain. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Reconciling God, we pray for those who govern our country and the nations of the world. Mindful of the immense responsibilities they bear, we pray for wisdom and strength. Fill them with compassion for the poor and the neglected and enable them to imagine creative solutions to critical areas of public policy. Inspire us all to move beyond simple acceptance of the misery which permeates our world to a place which represents peace and justice for all. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Renewing God, we pray for all who cry out for healing, that you will give patience, courage and faith to all who are disabled by injury or sickness. That you will comfort those who endure continual pain. Pouring upon them the healing balm of Your Holy Spirit. That You will grant fearless confidence to all Your children stricken with chronic or terminal illness. Enable us all to remember that each day is a gift from You. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Merciful God, in this season of family vacations and reunions, we pray for families everywhere that within the intimate bonds of parent and child, sister and brother, we may learn what it means to create a truly loving community. We pray for healing where trusts have been violated and promises broken. For reconciliation where estrangement has occurred. We pray especially for newly weds as they begin a life together full of hope. For those who feel alone, without a family to call their own. And for children who have never known the safety and security of home. Bless us in our efforts to love one another even in our most unlovable moments. Lord, in Your mercy, hear our prayer. Oh, living God, like the apostle Paul we confess we do not know how to pray as we ought, nor how to live as we ought. But, like Paul we are assured that You will help us. Accept the fervent prayers of Your people and look with compassion on all who turn to You for help. For You are gracious oh, lover of souls. And to You we give glory oh, blessed Trinity. Now and forever. Amen. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Therefore, as we remember the plight of our sisters and brothers along the flooded banks of the Mississippi, to whom this offering is dedicated today, let us present the offerings of our life and our labor to the Lord. (organ plays) (choir sings) (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- Accept oh, Lord our thanks and praise for all that You have done for us. We thank You for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life and for the mystery of love. We thank You for the blessing of family and friends and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side. We thank You for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts. And for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. We thank You also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on You alone. Above all, we thank You for Your son, Jesus Christ, for the truth of His word and the example of His life, for His steadfast obedience by which He overcame temptation, for His dying through which he overcame death, and for His rising to life again in which we are raised to the life of Your kingdom. Grant us the gift of Your Spirit, that we may know Him and make Him known and through

Him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to You in all things. This we pray in the name of the one who taught us boldly to pray, our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen. (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- The grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. ♪ hallelujah ♪ ♪ amen ♪ (organ plays)