

Rev. Miriam Foltz of UKirk STL
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 27, 2019

I Corinthians 12:13-21

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Let us pray together. Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So good morning. My name is Miriam Foltz, and I am the pastor of UKirk, St. Louis. Started in January 2015, UKirk or university church, Kirk being that Scottish word for church, as you should know, in Kirkwood. But UKirk is the Presbyterian campus ministry at Washington University and St. Louis University. We gather together on Sunday evenings at Trinity Presbyterian over in U City. And during those gatherings, we gather for dinner and worship. I talk about how we come together to be fed in both body and spirit as we are gathered together by Christ. We also meet on campus throughout the weeks for small-group studies, fellowship, interfaith, and a whole other range of events. We are a ministry that's supported by the Presbytery area congregations and Presbyterians like you. Please stop by our table after worship today to see photos of this ministry and everything we've been up to over the past few years, as well as learn about the myriad of ways that you can support college students in their journey of faith to be adult disciples of Christ.

Each January, UKirk kicks off the calendar year with a trip to the college conference at Montreat. Our group is a collection of college students from around the Presbytery, as well as students from WashU and SLU. We gather in what I call formed-on-the-road community. The drive from here to Western North Carolina gives us about 12 hours to really get to know each other. And when we get to the conference, we are gathered with 1,000 other college students to worship, to pray, to sing, to reflect, to play, and hike in the midst of God's beautiful creation. The theme of the conference this year was Compassionate Community. We heard from preachers and speakers, who shared profound reflections on this theme, exploring understanding and forgiveness, talking about spreading our wings, as well as putting down roots in our own faith. And we also explored diversity and inclusion, and how those two pieces are not mutually exclusive. But the

culminating moment of the conference came with our final keynote speakers. Publicity for the event had shared that chaplains from the Women's Correctional Facility just down the road would be the main speakers for that night. Indeed, two chaplains came and offered introductory reflections. But the main presenters for the evening were about a dozen of the female residents from the correctional facility. Their gospel choir regaled us with music, and then two of the female inmates shared their personal testimonies. These two women shared their stories, stories of childhoods filled with addiction and mental illness, childhoods filled with abuse and bad personal choices. Even as they named the ways that the justice system is not just, one of the inmates professed that prison saved her life. Our neighbors for the week, folks who were just a few miles down the road, but who we would not have otherwise crossed paths with came and shared and blessed us with their stories of redemption. These women spoke about being blessed with a compassionate community during their time in prison. A compassionate community that helped them to heal from their deep wounds and to receive treatment. To have hope again or perhaps even to have hope for the first time. They shared their call as well to continue seeking compassionate community upon their release from prison. They spoke about using their time in prison to seek an actual education. Neither of which had been able to access in their childhood and one of the speakers shared that her plan upon release was to become a social worker or a therapist. Getting to extend to others the care that she had so desperately needed as a young adult. It was holy ground. A burning bush moment for all of the young adults there. A call to connection. A call to seeing and hearing. A call to a new kind of community.

There is a lot that's beyond our control in this world. As testified by these women, sometimes we forget that we have a choice. Trapped by addiction or abuse or lack of access to education or opportunity, choice can feel like something that's just beyond our grasp and our path is instead laid out in front of us without any alternatives. But these women testified that compassionate community can break that illusion, can break the systems that oppress and hold us back. They showed us how compassionate community invites us to stand in holy ground together and work together to break those cycles of pain, of brokenness and of sin in this world. We got to hear the gospel proclaimed from the mouths of prisoners. The very folks Christ came for. In our gospel reading today, Christ gives the vision of compassionate community of the kingdom of God using the words of Isaiah. He proclaims that today God's reign has drawn near to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. In Luke, we are at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. He has been out to the wilderness, fasting and experiencing temptation, but when he returns, although he is famished, he is filled with the spirit. Jesus begins teaching and gathering folks across the region of Galilee and then he comes to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But this is no ordinary Sabbath day.

In the midst of launching his earthly ministry, Christ reveals his mission statement. He takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolls it and he reads the words, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." When he concludes he rolls up the scroll, gives it to the attendant and sits back down. It's a bit of a mic drop moment. For worship does not move on. Instead, all those who are gathered in the synagogue turn to look at Jesus. He has sat down amongst them but worship does not move on. Many eyes are looking at him. Eyes filled with questions, with wonder, with hope and Jesus speaks. "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." God's kingdom is today not yesterday or a vague someday in the future. Christ proclaims today. Next week's scripture we'll go into the crowd's reactions to Jesus's words. A bit of a spoiler alert. They aren't too thrilled with this startup preacher from their hometown. But for today we get to sit and marvel and stare at Jesus and try to take in this good news. As he proclaims that these words of Isaiah have been fulfilled today, this man from Nazareth who brings us good news, we get to marvel at Christ's mission statement. A creation transforming, a bigger table building, a grace-filled welcome statement of the year. Christ comes bringing restoration and relief and hope. Christ comes bringing the good news of God's grace. Christ's grace meets us where we are and does not leave us there.

Last semester, Ukirk explored the theme grace and gratitude. We considered the different ways that we encounter Christ's grace in our daily lives. We also considered how we live out that grace ourselves. It's difficult to articulate the good news. Indeed, the Bible contains four different accounts, each attempting to capture Christ's story. But particularly at the age of 18 or 22, it can be hard to name what Christ's grace exactly means. So one evening we began with Christ's question of Simon Peter. "Who do you say that I am?" It's a question that resonates across the centuries. From the hills of Galilee to us today, who do we say Christ is? Several years ago the Christian Century Magazine undertook a gospel in a seven word challenge. The publication invited famous theologians as well as everyday theologians in the pews to consider how they might succinctly describe their gospel understanding in seven words.

The Corinthians desired order and structure, to know who's better than one another in the eyes of God. In the verses before this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul has taken the intentional time to address the conflicts arising within their worship

gatherings. In the midst of different spiritual activities and practices, folks have been equating their spiritual capabilities with individual merit, comparing the content of their prayers and proclamations as if those reflected God's love and approval on each individual. When met with an abundance of spiritual gifts, the Corinthians chose division and jealousy and comparison politics. As the Corinthians worried about their social standing against one another, Paul reminds them that God is at work in their midst, moving through each one of their gifts. Paul reorients them from pettiness and infighting to celebrating Christ's compassionate community, a community that celebrates all of its members and all of their gifts, bringing each person together for the glory of God and lifting each other up.

Paul utilizes an extended metaphor about the church as a body. This metaphor likely surprised members of the Corinthian church when they received Paul's letter, for Paul takes a common rhetorical device for the 1st century, and instead of using it to support the social hierarchy or using it to encourage folks to know their place, Paul does the exact opposite. He turns the imagery on its head. Paul speaks of each person being an essential part of Christ's body, indispensably connected and needed, heads, shoulders, knees and toes, and all. Each member is called to clothe those otherwise deemed lesser with all the more greater honor and respect. Christ's good news, Christ's gospel is transformative, and Paul captures it. We don't hear it in our English translation, but allow me to indulge in a bit of Southern grammar. Paul's line is actually, "Now y'all." We hear it as the singular You, but in the Greek, it is a collective, "Y'all are the body of Christ." We are bound up together to embody and to live out Christ's mission each and every day.

Compassionate community should come with a warning label. Compassionate community can be disruptive, like in Luke chapter 5. When friends cut a hole in a house's roof to lower their paralyzed friend down to Christ, compassionate community can raise your home insurance rates. Compassionate community can challenge all of our previously held beliefs. Like in Acts, when Peter is sent by God to eat with and baptize Cornelius and the Gentile believers at Ceaserea, compassionate community challenges our preconceptions, our stereotypes, our prejudices. Compassionate community can also mean hard work. Compassionate community can mean reaching out to a sheep that isn't so much lost but rather has been hurt by community and doesn't want to be found. Compassionate community can mean welcoming back a lost son who shows up with questionable motives and unclear transformation. Compassionate community can be hard work.

UKirk will be exploring these stories and more throughout this semester. But as we explore our call to compassionate community, we will conclude each week with Paul's words, with Paul's charge to the Colossians. Paul writes in Colossians 3 that the Colossians should clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, and above all to clothe themselves with Christ's love and Christ's peace. Paul proclaims, "Now y'all are the body of Christ." Our mission is Christ's mission. Let us clothe ourselves in compassion and seek Christ together today, amplifying Christ's grace in this world, on our own and together as the body of Christ, in the name of our God, Holy Three-in-One, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Alleluia. Amen.