

“The Promise of Freedom”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 18, 2018

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your holy spirit. I pray that You would take that which has captured our attention and imagination, pray that You would take the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from the gospel and the prophet, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share, touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ; the word of life. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us. Let it be a word of comfort for us who suffer. A word of challenge for us who are too comfortable. Let it be a word that nurtures our faith. And let it be a word that invites to serve our neighbors. All of this, we ask in Your most faithful name. Amen.

So on Thursday night in the chapel doing bible study on Jeremiah 31:31 and following, "As we were talking about the days that were surely coming, and the law being written upon people's heart, and that we would no longer need to say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' for we would all know it," I asked, "What do you think this passage is all about?" And hands shot up everywhere, and I called on the first person, someone who's been in the church for well over 50 years, expecting to get some in-depth kind of answer to the question what the prophet is talking about, and instead, I got, "It's about Jesus." And I looked at them and said, "What?" And he said, "Well, we're already going into the fifth Sunday of Lent. We're making the turn towards Easter. It's got to be about Jesus." And I thought to myself, "Well, yeah, it's

pointing towards Jesus, but can we stay, just for a moment, in the message that the prophet is giving to the people of Israel? Can we just stop for a moment and be in the integrity of what this scripture is about?" And everyone's like, "No, it's all about Jesus." Well, guess what? They are all right. It is all about Jesus, but that's not what captured my attention.

For some reason, as I was driving home after Bible study, what captured my attention was the phrase, "We're making the turn towards Jesus, or towards Easter." And the image that came to me, the remembrance that came to me was when I was younger, playing golf with my grandfather. I had a short set of clubs; a wood, an iron, and a putter, cut [inaudible] long. I had a little bag. And my grandfather would take me out to High Cedars Golf Course in Orting, Washington. And he was not a slow golfer, he moved right along. And I did my best to whack that ball straight down the middle, like he did, and keep up with him. And on the seventh hole, after I put the flag in the cup and began to run to the tee because he was already teeing off, I said to him, "Grandpa, can we get something to eat?" And he said to me, "Yes. We'll get something at the turn." And I asked him what does that mean. And he said, "Well when we're done with the ninth hole we'll stop and get something to eat before we tee off on the tenth hole." I said, "Okay." Now, this was good news because this golf course has world famous peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and I was a kid and it was the seventh hole and I was running hard to keep up with him. So I'm like, "Yes. This is amazing." All of that transpired at the intersection of Adams and Kirkwood Road on Thursday night. That recollection of the turn just came right back to me. And then I was driving towards KUMC on my way home, the next image that came to me was when I was on sabbatical in Scotland. It was the first day there after flying all night and getting there without luggage. I had put on my clothes that I flew in, had a coat that I found, an old pair of golf clubs that the person who was renting me the house had left and I decided I'm going golfing. I'm going to check that box first. I'm going to go golfing in Scotland. And so I drove down from my little cottage all the way down to Brora where there was an old Tom Morris links course laid out, one of the originals. Tom Morris is the one who laid out St. Andrews. I go into the clubhouse where it was nice and warm. The person behind the desk was incredibly friendly. I said that I wanted to play golf, 18 holes by myself. He said, "That's fine." Gave me a scorecard. I looked at it. There was a grid with numbers and yardages on the front side and the back was a whole bunch of advertisements and I said, "Is there a map?" He kind of chuckles at me. "A map? No, there's no maps sonny." "Okay, well where do I go?" "Oh, go to the first tee out there." "Okay, the first tee." "Yes, the one with the cows [laughter]." And I looked out the window and sure enough, the first tee was straight out there by the water and there were cows laying there. And as I turned around and walked away, he said, "And don't worry, the cows are in play [laughter]." Okay.

Nine holes straight down the beach from the clubhouse. One after the other. The ninth hole was a par three. One of the most beautiful golf holes I've ever seen. Short little thing where you tee it off and it looks like you're hitting it right across the horizon. There was no way to figure out how far it was. You had no depth perception. But when you put the flag in the cup on the ninth hole, you made the turn because if you go nine holes straight down you're coming nine holes straight back. And that's why they called it the turn. Never before in my life had I figured it out until Thursday night. As I was thinking about making the turn from Lent towards Easter and then my grandfather and the sandwich and having a snack at the turn and it dawned on me that the reason they call it that is because in links courses you have nine out and nine straight back. Why am I talked about golf? Or making the turn? Yesterday I attended the memorial mass of Jona Knickman, a long-time employee, the receptionist here at the church for many years, who died rather unexpectedly earlier this week. I, along with a few others from church, attended the mass at what she lovingly called her, "Saint Dom's." Saint Dominique de Savio down in South County. The spirit in the place was lovely. It was like a family gathering. You could tell that everyone there, except for us Presbyterians, were mostly comfortable. But afterwards, I got done with the service and I walked to the car, and I called my wife and said I'd be home for lunch, and she said, "How was it?" And I said, "Well..." And there was something in my response of saying "Well" that she asked, "Well, what's wrong?" And at that moment, I couldn't quite put my finger on it. So I said, "I'll see you in a bit." And I got in the car and I started to drive back home. And as I was driving, I was replaying the service in my head, or maybe more in my heart. And what happened at the service, or what I heard or felt, was that we were praying for Jona on her way to heaven. And we were praying that God might open the gates and welcome her in. And we were praying that God might have a seat for her at the heavenly banquet and that she might be part of the saints forever. And it dawned on me that that entire service was a profound proclamation of "Maybe!" "Maybe, she's okay. Maybe, she's in heaven. Maybe, she's at the banquet. Maybe, she's in the company of all the saints. Maybe."

And I thought to myself, "When Karen and I do a memorial service, there ain't no maybes." I want to hear, "Yes," when

I go to a memorial service. "Is our loved one cared for by God?" "Yes." "Is our loved one welcomed into the heavenly banquet?" "Yes." "Are the pearly gates opened wide to welcome them in?" "Yes." "Are they part of the saints forever?" "Yes! Yes! Yes!" We preach good news, and there is no "maybe" in the good news. And all of this came sort of crashing together last night, as I was thinking about each of us and our understanding of what God is up to in our lives; as God writes the law within us, as God puts it on our hearts, as God says that "I will be your God. You will be my people. I will forgive your iniquity and remember your sin no more. You will not have to teach each other because you will know me. And I realize that for many of us sometimes we feel like we're far from those promises. We're on the eighth green and the clubhouse of God's promise is way back there. We don't know if we've got what it takes to turn around and get our way back. Or for some of us especially in this season of Lent as we examine our lives and what we've done in the past, we've got doubts about your place in God's plans and our place in God's promises. We may not say it aloud but if we were asked the question, "Are you sure that God loves you?" Some of us would answer, "Maybe." But I stand before you today to affirm a truth that is life-giving for each of us. That God's love is at work in our lives and is already there. There is not maybe. There is no turning towards to find something that isn't already there at work within you. Because by the power of the Spirit, God's love is apart of who you are right now and we Christians know that in our heads but our invitation is to embrace that in our hearts. We take our sins serious but we take our grace even more serious. We don't live in the land of maybe. We live and proclaim, "Yes." And someone who I think did an excellent job of pulling those things together is the psalmist for today's psalm. Someone who understood that there are questions, there are sins, there are mistakes, but there is at the end of the day God at work in my heart. So hear these words again. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin. I know my transgressions, my sin is ever before me. Against You, You alone have I sinned and done what is even in Your sight. So that You are justified in Your sentence and blameless when You pass judgment against me. Indeed I was born guilty a sinner when my mother conceived. You desire truth in the inward being. Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hisop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins. Blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.