

“We Live To the Lord”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, September 17, 2017
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 114 and Romans 14:1-12

*When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion.
The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.
Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?
Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.*

Psalm 114

*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.
Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another?
It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.
And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.
If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord;
so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.
For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

*Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written,
'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.'
So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

Romans 14:1-12

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 the words and images that we carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this day to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word of Christ work in our hearts and in our minds. Let it also be at work in our lives in what we say and in all that we do. Let it nourish our faith and guide us in right action. Let it help us and comfort us in our places of need. Let it challenge us when we are too sure. But most of all, dear Lord, let it guide us so that we might be your body at work in this world, alive and full of grace. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Earlier this week, I was watching a video. The video was of a large-- or a gathering of Black Lives Matters protestors standing in the street, and then a white SUV honked and went through the protestors rather quickly, some of them jumping out of the way. And I thought to myself, "Oh no, what are they doing in Charlottesville again?" It could have been Charlottesville, or Detroit, or Washington DC, but instead it was Kirkwood Road right in front of City Hall. An SUV driving through a crowd of people, some of them jumping out of the way, right in the heart of our own community. I thought to myself, "Why on earth did that person in the SUV drive through the crowd so quickly? They could have done damage to someone, maybe even killed them." And then I thought, "Why on earth would people protest in the middle of the street when cars were coming? Are they crazy?" And then I realized this was happening literally at the heart of our own community. And then I watched as barriers were erected around the courthouse downtown and news that the National Guard was being activated was coming about. I couldn't believe that what I was afraid of seemed to be beginning again, almost like a Ferguson 2.0. The tension was thick in the air. Businesses were closing and sending people home on Friday. Everybody was on edge wondering what will the-- how will this case be decided? And then news of the verdict came out, not guilty. And I, for one, braced for the worse.

Not long after the verdict came out, I got a letter along with all the other ministers in the presbytery from our presbytery leader, the Reverend Craig Howard. He wrote, "Friends, the not guilty verdict in the Jason Stockley case was delivered this morning. The results are sending waves of disappointment, despair, and anger throughout St. Louis, especially in the black community. This verdict echoes a similar story of injustice which African Americans have experienced in this nation. It rings back to lynching of black bodies at the turn of the 20th century. Injustice for assault and killing during the Civil Rights movement and the series of deadly encounters with police officers in recent years. This case is exasperated by the presence of audio and videotape which invite everyone to make their own judgment of innocence or guilt in this case. The protest and anger that is exhibited because of this verdict is linked to the racialized history of the treatment of Black people in America. As an African American, I cannot divorce myself from my Black identity. Even though I serve as leader of a predominantly white denomination, I am convinced the people in Giddings-Lovejoy are good-hearted, hospitable and kind. But we live in a toxic mess and we are challenged to bring change to the words we say and the actions we take."

And then there's Paul's word in Romans that the lectionary chose before all these situations occurred. A lectionary in which Paul is addressing a community of faith that is divided over whether or not you could eat meat and be faithful or you need to be a vegetarian and be faithful. Whether or not you need to honor the Sabbath to be faithful or whether or not you can honor every day and be faithful. And I've wondered all week long if God would say to us as Paul would say to us, whether you decide to protest peacefully or not, or not protest, whatever you do, do it in honor of the Lord

and it's going to be okay. Can we, in fact, have both sides of this? Where some of us get out and protest and some of us sit at home and wonder what it is we're supposed to do? And that each of those, each of those might be, at least in this moment, a faithful response for us.

As I was watching one of the protests on television, there was a crowd gathering and Roche Madden, who's a Kirkwood resident was doing the announcing and at one point he said the crowd was getting a little bit ruffled up and kind of hassling the journalist. And so they decided to move back a little bit and he and the camera person were moving away and you saw this crowd gathering and it kept getting a little bit bigger and all of a sudden in the middle of it there was this blue t-shirt that said, "Out of chaos, hope." And I thought, "PDA's already there?" I backed up the TV and saw the picture and I'm like, "How could a PDA shirt get in the middle of this protest downtown during the day. And of course, it was the Reverend Susan Andrews, who's the interim pastor at Second Presbyterian Church, a church in the city, an urban congregation, that needs to be out and present in the midst of all that's happening in today's world. I take great solace that the Reverend Craig Howard, in his letter, ended with, "I do not have the answers, but I place these questions before us."

For years, ever since Ferguson, I've kept wondering, what is it that we are to do in order to live in a peaceful land where justice is truly blind? What is it that we are to do? Every time a situation like this rises up, I ask what is it that we're supposed to do? What's the thing? Just tell me what it is and I'll do it. What is the faithful response? In fact, I've prayed this during the week, waiting for God to say, "This is it. Go do this." But when I think about protesting, to be honest, I just get exhausted. I do not feel that call upon my heart. But if you feel it upon yours, God bless you. Go do it. And if you don't, God bless you. This is what Paul invites us to consider. That Christians of profound faith can differ on how they see a faithful response to a given situation. Some Christians, because of the place that they are and what they do, feel that God is calling them to be out and present and protesting. And other Christians, faithful to God, do not have that same call. But what is it that we are supposed to do? I do not have the answers, but I place these questions before us. So as I was holding all of this, and reading and watching and praying and wondering, I got news that U2, the very popular rock band, had canceled their show. And that in the note announcing the cancellation, the lead singer, Bono, wrote, "I found myself reading Dr. King's speech or sermon from the National Cathedral, and asking myself, is this 1968 or 2017?"

I went and I read Dr. King's sermon to the National Cathedral, 49 years ago, and this is part of what he said, "Secondly, we are challenged to irradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice from our nation. I must say this morning that racial injustice is still the black man's burden and the white man's shame. It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle - the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic. And I can see nothing more urgent than for America to work passionately and unrelentingly to get rid of the disease of racism. Something positive must be done. Everyone must share in the guilt as individuals and as institutions. The government must certainly share the guilt, individuals must share the guilt, even the church must share the guilt. We must face the sad fact that at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing "In Christ, There Is No East Or West," we stand in the most segregated hour of America. The hour has come for everybody, for all institutions of the public sector and the private sector to work to get rid of racism. And now if we are to do it we must honestly admit certain things and get rid of certain myths that have constantly been disseminated all over our nation. One of the myths is the myth of time. It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And there are those who often sincerely say to us and to our allies in the white community, "Why don't you slow up? Stop pushing things so fast. Only time can solve the problem. And if you will just be nice and

patient and continue to pray, in 100 or 200 years the problem will work itself out." There's an answer to that myth, and it is that "time" is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I am sorry to say this morning that I am absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the extreme rightists of our nation, the people on the wrong side, have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill."

He goes on to talk about the power that we have as partners in Christ, and what it means for us to work through this idea of time settling this problem. He says, "Know that we need to be involved and committed to making our lives and our land and our culture safe and responsible for all people." I've realized that this verdict triggers something that I truly do not understand in my being. But I believe that the invitation for me, and maybe for many of us, is to not simply write off the protesters, or write off what we deem as un-Christian or crazy behavior, something that we wouldn't do. Instead, I think we just need to sit with the question, as Craig says, and as many others have, what is it that we can do in order to live a life that is just and right and good. Not only for ourselves, but for everyone in our community. I wish that I had the answer today, but I don't. Today I only have the question. What can I do? Amen.