

“Being God's Merciful People”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 14, 2017

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings from Scripture: John 14:1-4 and 1 Peter 2:2-10

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’

Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

John 14:1-14

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

*‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’*

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

*‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner’,
and*

*'A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.'*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy,

but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:2-10

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, the images, the celebrations, the worries that each of us carry within, the words that we've heard read from the holy scriptures, the words we've offered in song and in prayer and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share—touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word be pure spiritual milk that helps each of us grow into salvation and wholeness. Help that word fill the needs that each of us have, and help that word be a word of comfort and mercy that we offer to others. We ask this all in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

I had the privilege of attending Princeton Theological Seminary to get my Masters of Divinity Degree in order to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, USA. All of that said because they taught me how to stand in a place like this and read scripture. They taught me how to not do crazy things like mess with my nose 17 times while I'm preaching because it's a tic that I am unaware of. They filmed us and humiliated us and made us not do those sorts of things. We learned how to feel our feet on the floor and had an entire lecture on how to stand and feel the energy coming up through our body, up into our chest and then out into the sanctuary in order that we might stay secure in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the teacher of this class, Professor Charles Bartow, also reminded us that we would face temptation in the pulpit. On Fathers Day and Mothers Day and Memorial Day and Veterans Day, we would be tempted to preach about Mothers Day and Fathers Day and Memorial Day and Veterans Day and any other day that Hallmark decided was a holiday—we would be tempted, but don't do it. Instead, preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the scriptures as you read them and proclaim it proud and good. And I thought to myself now, as I remembered that this week, that's all well and good for a tenured professor at an endowed institution, not reliant upon pledges to pay his salary and the salary of the staff and to fund every mission and ministry that we do. So in honor of Dr. Charles Bartow, I want to proclaim to each of you Happy Mothers Day! God bless you, Chuck, wherever you are.

And it is a great day for us to celebrate mothers. It's a day for us to honor and to remember, to give thanks for all of the good things that mothers give to each of us, the mothers that we had, the mothers that you are, the mothers that you will become someday. Mothers Day is a time for us to create space and remember and give thanks. But often on Mothers Day we tend to put a shiny, happy face on the day and to be honest, I feel compelled as the pastor of all of you, that I want today and every day when we gather for worship to be real and honest and authentic.

I have had two experiences this week and I find myself standing here this morning, torn

between each of them. Earlier in the week I called up Rebecca Bealmear, a member of our congregation and choir, and I said, "Hey, can I come visit your new daughter, Lolo, Laurie Louise?" And she said, "Of course you can. Why don't you come at 2 o'clock? The others will be asleep. It'll just be the two of us and it will be a perfect time." And so I showed up around 2 o'clock and I came in just as she finished nursing her baby. And she was holding Lolo in her arms and I could see the baby's face all red and that smile and the eyes closed. I imagined the baby with her eyes rolled back in her head in what my wife and I used to call the 'milk coma'. Ah, she was just in heaven! And Rebecca said, "Would you like to hold her?" And I said, "Of course I would." And she handed me this little tiny baby and I took her in my arms and I was kissing her forehead and smelling her—she smelled great—and just loving on her as much as I could. And all of a sudden she started to turn her head towards my chest and her mouth started to open and she started to get a little fussy and I thought, *oh, sorry, honey, I ain't got what you need now*. I gave her back to Rebecca. What a great image, though, of what it means to be a mother and to offer that pure milk that gives life.

And then on Friday, I found myself in a darkened room at Children's Hospital. Our financial secretary, Jane Meppiel's daughter, Amanda and her husband Andrew have two children. Their youngest child, Nora, has a genetic disease that makes her care very complicated with lots of medical demands. But their older daughter, Alex, who is about 4 was feeling sick all week. So Amanda took her to the specialist in Rolla and then they transferred her to Children's in order to provide more care, and I got there knowing that they had found a mass on her liver. Jane and her husband, John, and the sick child were out in the play area at the hospital, so when I walked into the room, it was just Amanda holding her youngest child. I looked down at her as I walked in and she looked up at me and she asked, "Is this really God's plan for us?" And I said, "No." Just before that visit, Jani and I had gone down to the Central West End. I needed to pick up a new pair of glasses. We decided to get a bite to eat. She stayed in the car while I made the visit and just as I was getting out of the car to go into the hospital, she said, "What are you going to say?" I still don't know the answer. What do we say? What do we say when life doesn't work out exactly as we hoped it would? What do we say when there is suffering and hurt that is beyond our ability to understand or comprehend?

After preaching the service at 8:15, one of the congregants came out and grabbed me as I was heading into the 9:05 service and said, "Thank you so much for making space for us to be honest about how hard it is at times to be parents." And then he pointed to the courtyard and he said, "Let's never forget that some of our children are already out there before us." Today is a day to be thankful and a day to be grateful, a day to remember, a day to honor, a day to celebrate. But not all of us can be there today. Some of us are in mourning. Some of us are angry. Some of us are frustrated. Some of us are scared to death about what is unfolding with our mothers, or mothers with their children.

And so somewhere between these two images of what it means to be a real-life mother in today's world, a mother with a healthy baby that is being nurtured and sustained and a child lying in a hospital bed and being worried sick that the diagnosis might be horrible. Somewhere in the middle of all of that, I come to these texts in scripture, especially to the passage in Peter. And I hear Jesus through Peter saying to each of us, "You are the living, vibrating presence of God. You are the spiritual household, the holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." I hear God inviting each of us to realize that when we find ourselves in these in between times, in between the highest joy and the lowest low, we need to stand firm and trust and sometimes that's so easy to do. And sometimes standing in trust is us on our knees in tears. And yet we are chosen. We are that royal priesthood, that holy people, we are God's people. Our invitation

is to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us all out of darkness into light. Sometimes those mighty acts are awfully small, very quiet, but incredibly profound.

I know that I have said this before, but I feel compelled to say it again and again and again. I also understand that this is not a stewardship sermon where I'm trying to get you to give more money so that more things can happen, but I want you to know that every time Karen and I or a Stephen Minister or a Deacon or an Elder or a volunteer goes to do the work of God beside someone who is in trouble—be it a mother, a father, a child—no matter who it is, you go with us.

Last night we had 18 guests at Room at the Inn, 18 homeless people that needed a place to stay and be safe. You provided that place. Every time we do something as a church, we do it together and I believe that is what Peter is trying to help us realize. Once we didn't belong, we were outsiders, we thought we were on our own but no, no, no! We're together. We are God's people and we are able to offer mercy one to another to another. Each time we do that, we do it in the name of Christ of behalf of each other.

There are many of you before who I could name and lift up for the ministry that you do, but I do not want to embarrass you. So instead I'm going to embarrass those who get paid. One of the greatest blessings of my job is to watch Bill Stein care for the choir. Not only is he a consummate musician, he is a great leader, a welcoming presence to those who are new or who want to sing. He doesn't tell you that you really aren't that great, he just says, "Come and sing." But more than anything, he cares about you. He loves you. He is your pastor. It is truly an honor to watch him work and care for each of you. When he does that, you are doing that through him, just as Christ is.

I've watched Rob as he continues to grow into his role as Director of Children, Youth and Families and the level of care and concern that he has for our children and our youth and their parents. I watched him make not only Plan B because there was a trip to Mound Ridge and the roads were flooding and the rivers were rising, but he said that he had a Plan B and a Plan C, even. Because he wasn't sure what was going to happen, but he was going to have them come together and he was going to let the parents know that everything was okay.

And then there is this remarkable woman (indicating Karen) who cares deeply for each of you in your times of need. She shows up at your hospital bed, visits you in rehab, who counsels you in her office, prays for you and is concerned about your education, who does so many things so well. A remarkable pastor. In spending time with her, I know that there are times when she cares so much that it hurts and it's hard.

Each of us is called to serve and we are never quite sure what that call is going to entail. Sometimes we are called to celebrate the pure joys of life, like celebrating mothers on Mothers Day. And some days we are called to stand beside a mother as she lays her child to rest. My hope and prayer for us as a congregation is that we can always be real, honest and authentic about the ups and downs of life. I want us to celebrate with joy the greatness that we can, but I always want that celebration tempered with the reality of life, not to diminish the joy that we can share, but so that we can know for sure that we have the truth and the truth will set us free. Amen.