

# **“Stand Firm In the Lord”**

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**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, October 15, 2017**

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings from Scripture: Exodus 32:7-14 and Philippians 4:1-9**

## **Exodus 32:7-14**

*The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’*

*But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.”’ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

## **Philippians 4:1-9**

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

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 that each of us carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning, to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words into the Word of Jesus Christ, into the word of truth and peace and love. And let that Word do its work within us, among us, and through us. Let that Word nurture our hearts and our faith. Let that Word comfort us in our places of hurt. Let that Word guide us in what we say and do. And let that Word call us into service in your world. We ask all of this in the faithful name of Christ who is our Lord now and forever. Amen.

This past Saturday, I had the very distinct honor of walking my daughter down the aisle and standing

right over there as she and I stood at the beginning of her wedding service, waiting for the music to die down. And when it did, my friend Bruce, the officiant, asked everyone to please be seated. He then read statements on the gifts of marriage for the Church and for the world, for Anna, and her future husband, Anthony. He offered a prayer. And after the prayer, he asked Anna if she intended to enter into the covenant of marriage with Anthony. She said yes, I think [laughter]. I watched the video later. I heard her say-- yeah, it was a yes. Then Bruce turned to Anthony, who was up here and said, "Anthony, is it your intention to enter into the covenant of marriage with Anna?" He did say yes. I heard it, because afterwards I said, "Thank God," under my breath [laughter]. And then Anthony came down and got Anna and they entered up into the sacred space.

Yesterday I had the honor of being the officiant at the wedding of a daughter of a member of our church. It was in the chapel. It was a small gathering. But as I stood beside the groom this time watching the proud poppa escort his daughter down the aisle, I had a flashback to a week earlier, and I recognized the undeniable smile that was on his face. I could feel the joy that he had rising up within him as he stood next to his beautiful daughter, about to watch as she and her fiance, Ross, came together as husband and wife. As the music died, I asked everyone to please be seated. I shared the statements on the gifts of marriage. I offered a prayer. I asked Mary if she intended to enter into the covenant of marriage with Ross. She said yes. I asked him the same. He responded in the affirmative. And I gave him a tap on the shoulder and down he went to get her. For an entire week, bookended by the experience of myself standing there and then Mr. Huxhold yesterday standing in the chapel with his daughter, Mary, I've been thinking about all of that in the backdrop of the news that we've been hearing coming out of Hollywood and New York City about Harvey Weinstein and his alleged behavior. I've been wondering what kind of advice a father would give to his daughter as she stands on the brink of a new way of life, married to the one that she loves, a young woman beginning a new aspect of her life, married and sometimes, often, a professional career. What kind of advice would a father give to his daughter? And then I was thinking that maybe it would be too late to give that advice at that age; that it would be better to give it as your daughter is much younger, before she faces what the world so often will throw at her? And it dawned on me that Paul's letter to the Phillippians - this particular set of verses - is great advice. "Stand firm in the Lord." If I could say anything to my daughter or any daughter of yours who's getting married, or any son for that matter, I would say to them, "Stand firm in the Lord." Stand firm in the fact that you are created in the image of God and that you bear the spirit of Christ within you. And even though we are all different, we each are carriers of that spirit, so stand firm in that truth. Stand firm in the promise that you are a child of God, created in the image of God, bearing the spirit of God, and that you as an individual deserve nothing other than being seen in that way.

This week we have learned what happens, when people are seen as idols and objects; the devastation and hurt that it causes. So my encouragement to any of you, and to really all of us, is to not allow ourselves to be seen as idols or objects, but to remain firmly grounded in the truth of God, that we are in fact created as children of God--people of God--and that we need to be respected at all times. The passage goes on and, again, and gives good advice. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice." There's something about a wedding that teaches you what joy feels like. Deep and abiding joy. I think we've had it as children, and then over time, we sometimes forget. We have these moments - weddings are one of them - when we get to taste again what joy tastes like.

Paul says that we should be gentle; to let our gentleness be known to everyone; to let our faith in that first promise that we are rooted and grounded in the promise of God. Let that guide who we are in such a way that we don't need to fight to get ahead. We don't need to run over people. We don't need to objectify anyone. We can simply be who we are - a decent and kind-hearted people, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. I would also remind my daughter and the daughters who are getting married, and the men who are marrying them, that the Lord is near. As Psalm 23 reminds us, that when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God's presence is with us - a comfort, a peace, a protection - and we always

need to remember that God is near' that we're not alone. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to be bullied or harmed. We need to trust. Paul goes on and says many other wonderful things that would be great advice. He concludes the passage with, both in verse 7 and verse 9, the peace of God, or the God of peace. He says that when we enter into prayer, we are offering those prayers to the God of peace, and that when we keep on doing everything that He's teaching, we know that God's peace is with us; God's wholeness is within us, and we should let no one sully that wholeness, for we are created in the image of God.

As I was teaching on this passage on Thursday night in our dinner and bible study, the image that came to me about standing firm, was of a tree and its roots growing deep. And I presented the image of us being as trees with our roots going out, and each root is one of the verses - joy, and gentleness, and nearness, and peace - and that we could stand, knowing who we are as Christ, whenever the wind blows and our branches are swaying, our trunk would stay exactly where we need to be if we could keep those things in mind. After that, someone came up to me - a woman in the class - after we were done, and she said, "That's a great image - that stand firm; that tree that's rooted in the earth - but I think about the sycamore trees who I've read have their roots grow together and that's how they stay firm." And I said, "Well, I'm not aware of that, but I've heard that aspen trees are trees who have a root system that grows together, and that each individual tree is really a part of its neighbor because the roots grow and become one." We chatted about that and then left. The next day, on Friday, I was intrigued because I wanted to get it right when I presented it to you. So I typed in intermingled roots, and found a story about redwood trees, of all things. Redwoods that grow to 350 feet in the air have one of the shallowest root systems of any tree on the planet. At most, 5 feet deep for a 350 foot tree. But what keeps redwoods upright when there's wind and rain and all kinds of things trying to topple it over, is the fact that that root system goes out 100 feet in every direction. And when you have trees that are 10 feet apart, and you have roots that are 100 feet in every direction, all of those roots join together, and in a sense, hold each other up.

This is maybe what it means to stand firm in the Lord; not just that we need to do it as individuals, but more importantly we need to realize that as a community of faith, our responsibility is to make sure all of us are standing firm together, in a sense that your roots are mine and vice versa. I guess in my years of ministry I've probably done over a couple of hundred weddings - so far I've only been the father of one - but there's a part of the service that until this past week I've often considered a throwaway. After we ask the bride and the groom if it's their intention to enter into the covenant of marriage with the other and they both say yes, and they come up and stand together for the first time, whoever's officiating looks out at all of you - the congregation that's gathered - and asks if it's your intention, as a community of faith, to do all you can to support those loved ones in the promises that they are about to enter into this day. "Do you?" "We do," it echoes back. Everyone saying yes. I've always thought that's a cute part of the service; a nice way to get people involved, but what I realize this week, more than any other, is that that's really maybe the most important part. At least it's the most important part for what we can do for someone else. What we can do for someone else is see them always as a child of God and never as an object. What we can do for someone else is make sure that the gifts that God has given them are honored and respected. And what we can do in order to ensure the well-being of someone else or a newly married couple, is to realize that how we live our life matters to them, or as it says in Galatians, "We are all one in Christ." May we celebrate our oneness and honor our individual, created images. Amen.