

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“For He Is Our Peace”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, October 4, 2020

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words:

- *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*
- *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*
- *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*
- *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work.*
- *Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*
- *You shall not murder.*
- *You shall not commit adultery.*
- *You shall not steal.*
- *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.*
- *You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.*

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’

Ephesians 2:14-22

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So, he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Will you pray with me? Holy God, Holy One, we trust in Your presence with us. And throughout the journey of our lives be with us now as we consider Your word to us for the words You have invited me to share and for the gift of community. In Christ name, we pray. Amen.

In this pandemic time as many places say the building may be closed but the work of the church goes on. If you drive by the parking lot on Sunday afternoons, you will see Amanda Yahng, with Rob Monroe and others, meeting with the confirmation class. And our youth group meets in different ways as well. Some of the women's circles are meeting in the park. Others are meeting in backyards. There are a lot of different ways. Life does carry on with the gift of those who want to be together in community and share thoughts and ideas. And so, while the choir may not be singing in the sanctuary, thanks to Zoom, they're still in touch with each other. Earlier in the pandemic, the members of the choir put together a booklet reflecting on the challenges of these pandemic days. They collected thoughts and words from favorite hymns and anthems and talked about the things they've been doing during this time apart. And they reflect the many different ways we are all trying to live through these times. I'm going to guess though that, one of the most difficult parts of this time apart for the choir is that their opportunities for Fellowship have been put on hiatus. For choir members, they love to eat and they love to cook. And this week George Durnell and Helen Sandifer put together a cookbook in memory of Nancy Magnuson, a member of our choir, who died earlier this year. She was well known for her wonderful cooking, especially her Swedish dishes. And the cookbook of 200 recipes is a very fitting thing because when the choir isn't singing, they're usually eating. Some would gather after choir rehearsal at what was the Kirkwood Station Brewing Company. A brunch on Easter between services and a post-Christmas party were always times for experiencing their cooking abilities and fellowship. And indeed, I would say that part of the way they live out their faith is in fellowship around the table. But it makes sense that we have this sense of fellowship around the table because it is very rooted in Judaism and in the early church. The meals-shared at the Last Supper with Jesus and the disciples, as I said to the children, was a Passover meal with bread and fruit of the vine. And it was reshaped that night into a powerful symbol of our faith being lived out as an active community and fellowship. And for us as Presbyterians, in our theology, we view this sacrament as a meal where Jesus is with us in spirit each time we gather in his name and break bread together.

And so, today in worship, while we're not all here together, we will gather around our tables for table fellowship. And it's interesting to remember that in the early church, communion was celebrated as a part of the fellowship together. It made me wonder if that's how the tradition of the Sunday dinner came to be, instead of worship with a meal that included communion, worship was held and everybody went home to Sunday dinner. I don't know. I'd have to research that. But it's been some time since we have gathered around the table. And so, it is meaningful to be together. It's also World Communion Sunday today and that is a tradition that we have with other churches all around the world. A reminder that we all worship the same God and find meaning in the sacrament of Holy Communion. World communion began with the moderator, Hugh Thompson Kerr, many years ago, who was a pastor and moderator of General Assembly, and he got that idea to have a connection among the various denominations. So, it began by going through the Presbyterian churches and then in 1940 the Federal Council of Churches took it on and it spread across the world. Not all denominations do practice this. But I find particular power in the reminder that the church is bigger than just each congregation or denomination. For in reflecting on Paul's words today, we hold Jesus in common as our hope and our peace. And so, when we share this meal we lift up that hope and the recognition that when we come together we are stronger as a community than individually. And as I said earlier, that's the focus of Paul's words to the Ephesians. He invited those who were in conflict in the

early church to find their oneness in Christ. To remember it is not uniformity that makes us one, it is the unity we have in following Jesus Christ.

Communion is an act of fellowship that reminds us that the spirit is not only present in a particular time and place but throughout the world and throughout time. And this year we realized how important it is for us to focus on what we have in common. Because when we do that it binds us together. We don't deny the reality of our differences but we lift up the most important aspect of faith--that we are one in Christ and that we work together toward common goals of justice and mercy and grace and peace. And I have found myself thinking too that we come to this table as individuals but also as a community. A community that is made one in the body of Christ. For when we see ourselves as something-- part of something that's greater I think we become a more powerful witness to what and who Jesus has called us to be. And what better place to do it than around what nourishes us in body and spirit--food at the table, for in all of life in fellowship and food brings us together as families and groups and communities. And it nourishes us in body and spirit. For it is around a table that we share our stories and we create our stories. We live out our stories and we create new memories. It's a way to strengthen our relationships both in body and spirit. And I think that's perhaps one of the most difficult things of this pandemic time. We're not as free to share meals and time together with those as we usually do. The other thing we've become aware of is that more people in this time do not have enough food, that some are out of work. Some, when they are not in school, do not get the meals that they had received there. Restaurant owners and workers are in need of business and support. And we've all been called to respond to those needs. Some people volunteer at food centers. Others give food to pantries. Some are buying meals from restaurants. And others are giving monies to organization that help other people survive. Our youth passed out bags for Kirk here this week. And many of you continue to drop off items at the church. It is important for us to make a difference, because we need to make sure all are fed.

I came across an article about an area of Colorado whose people came together to provide support. The writer of the article said, "People who live on Colorado's rural eastern plains often live far apart, physically. But the pandemic has brought them closer together." When the state shut down restaurants and other businesses, people realized they had to find a way to make sure these businesses survived. And through the paper and social media, they were invited to donate to the Chamber and other groups, and many stepped up. Some gave their stimulus checks. Others gave from savings, others from coin jars. Some gave 3,000. Some gave a few pennies. But in two different towns, they collected almost \$120,000 in order to help 30 businesses in their area. Whether it was a hair salon or a coffee shop, all of that money was essentially invested back into the community.

The reasons people helped were as varied as the amounts. But they had this sense that we're in this together, and we need to invest in one another. The businesses could use the money in a variety of ways: they could pay furloughed employees, or buy the new equipment needed to abide by new regulations. Some even discovered new ways of doing things that they would like to continue in the future. One restaurant owner said they're willing to put their money where their heart is. But it was more than money that helped. The camaraderie and spirit generated by those towns and the people around them have helped them stay positive because they knew their neighbors were not just the people across the street and next door. They supported one another because they saw they were part of a whole--of a body. Even if differences had existed before, it didn't matter now. They were helping one another survive and work for the future. And when they did that, they became sources of hope for one another. And I think that is the story of World Communion Sunday and Peacemaking Sunday. We remember as we gather around

tables near and far, that the Spirit is present with all of us and connects us. The Spirit moves among us and connects us not only with one another in this congregation but across the miles with our sisters and brothers and other churches. So, as we share in this holy meal, may we remember that Jesus is present among us as we break this bread and share the cup. May we remember we are called to recommit ourselves to serve and feed others through acts of kindness, and generosity, and love that brings peace for heart and mind.

In closing, I think a portion of the reading from Paul is worth repeating, "For Jesus is our peace who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier of the dividing wall." His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to you who were near. For through Him, we both have access to the Father by one spirit. We are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people. Members of God's household, join together. Indeed, Jesus is God's gift of love. This Son, who has and will always have the power to make us one." Thanks be to God for this wonderful gift. Amen.