

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“The Living Spirit Within”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 29, 2020

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'

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, songs, and prayers that each of us offer this day, the words we've heard read from scripture, the words that are upon our hearts, and the words that you've laid upon my heart to share. Bless, touch, and transform all of these words into your word for us. And let your word speak to us. Let your word guide us. Let your word be our comfort and our strength. We ask this prayer in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. As we continue this worship experience online-only, I'm sure I speak for Karen and Bill and Rob when I tell all of you that you're in our hearts. As Louisa was singing, I looked around the empty sanctuary and I saw people, Paul and Marty-- I saw Paul and Sarahlyn, so many people. Thankfully, most of you sit in the same spot. I prayed for Ed and John, for Larry, for Art, for Anita, for Ava who always provides a nod at the end of the walkout. We hold each of you dearly in our hearts. And we miss being with you.

And I know from the calls and emails that you, too, miss being together. In this time of social distancing and self-isolation, many of us are sort of reaching the limits and starting to be infected with that other disease called cabin fever. Our normal routines have been completely destroyed. And now, we spend time figuring out what the new normal looks like for each of us. But as I was thinking about the social distancing and isolation and churches across the country and around the world that are empty on Sundays, I couldn't believe how appropriate and how amazing the spirit works to give us, this Sunday, the passage from Ezekiel. Six months ago or more, when I decided to preach on this passage, I had no incline of what would be going on in today's world. I just thought it would make a good sermon. And to be even more honest, I thought the assigned reading from John was just too long. But at a time when we now hear about escalating numbers of cases and deaths and dire situations and epicenters forming in the metro, [New York?] area, Washington state, now Louisiana; sickness, illness, shortages, all of these things swirling around in front of us in the news, in our minds, in our hearts, and in our prayers. The passage is about restoration and the power of God to bring new life to an entire people who see themselves as decimated because of what's going on in their lives. God says to the prophet Ezekiel, "Go and preach, essentially, to my people. And say to them, who feel like their bones are dry or that's all they are, that they are disconnected, that their flesh is withered away. There's no life in them. Go to them and say, 'I am the Lord. This is my word to you. I will put you back together. And I will give you life, my life, breath, spirit, wind.'" All of these words are the life that God intends for all of us to have. God says to the people through the prophet, "I will do this for you." And what a timely message it is. Alone, concerned, news that paints a dim or a disturbing picture, and in the middle of it, we hear God, through the prophet Ezekiel, say, "Wait a minute. I'm going to bring things back together and make them alive and viable and vibrant," good news in the midst of the chaos and concern that we find ourselves living in today.

One of the things that's so amazingly powerful about the message that we don't look at all the time because we see, "Oh, God's going in and putting things back together and giving new life. That's good enough--" what we don't realize is that God is giving that new life and restoration to all people: young, old, business owners, workers, teachers, students, parents, kids, grandparents. All people are being restored and brought to this new life or vibrant life that the spirit or wind or breath gives to us. Not just a few, not even the many, but all people in the prophecy of Ezekiel are made well and alive. And to me, this is important because it seems that at a time in our society when the good of all has been forgotten or, at least over the last decade, has been pushed to the side, in its place, we've put profit and power-- those are the only two things that matter in the world. We need to make a-- we need to be more powerful, the common good or we can forget that. But in this current situation, we realize the tension and balance that's necessary between the common good economic prosperity and personal, or corporate, or governmental power. And it's only when the common good is so threatened, so that the foundations of profit and power are starting to sway, that people realize that balance matters. The common good, just as the prophecy says, is really that which is most essential in our lives. Because without the common good there is not profit, there is not power, there is not community, there is not life as we know it.

And the news these days is filled with stories about how the common good has been abandoned or set aside, how people are trying to take advantage of this situation for their own gain or the gain of their company. In fact, in a New York Times article recently there was a story where we see this limit in bold relief. The first line of the article reads, "30 years ago, a group of US public health officials came up with a plan to address what they regarded as one of the medical system's crucial vulnerabilities, a shortage of ventilators." It goes on to tell the story of how a small, innovative company, Newport Medical Instruments, won a government contract to build affordable, \$3,000, simple, mobile ventilators in order to increase the national stockpile. At the time of the awarding of this contract, traditional ventilators cost \$10,000. Newport Medical set out to build those ventilators, they made prototypes, the government chose one, signed a contract, and everything continued on its way. And then about a year later a big company, Covidien, which builds regular ventilators at \$10,000 saw that this new start up, with its cheaper, simple, mobile ventilators was a challenge to its profit center, and so it bought the company, cancelled the contract with the government and essentially scuttled the idea for small, affordable, inexpensive ventilators, in a sense, to protect its profits. Rather than understanding the importance of caring for the common good, this company decided that profits would be more important. But in this world that we now live in, we're seeing companies of all kinds change their tune. And even though there's been a lot spoken about General Motors in the news, they have, to their good credit, joined forces with Ventec, a small company out of Bothell, Washington, which builds simple, portable, affordable ventilators, and now with the government forcing them to do so, or mandating them to do so, they will begin producing 10,000 ventilators later [some?] month beginning very soon. In a sense, GM and Ventech are honoring, not one, two, but all three of the pegs between common good, profit, and power, honoring the balance that's so important for all of us. And this balance is important because, in the state of Missouri, we now have 838 cases of COVID-19 with 10 deaths. And as we've heard stories about how the elderly are most vulnerable to this disease, in Missouri, the highest number of cases is in the age range of 50 to 54 and the second-highest number, 89 cases, is in the age range of 20 to 24. So what we're learning is what we first hear may not be the truth. This story is rapidly changing. And as more and more situations or cases are discovered, it's going to change our understanding. My hope is that rather than being unsettling, this change is something we understand to be a part of this story. And it's going to happen. It's not anything to get upset about or afraid of.

On March 20th, in the United States, there were 18,747 confirmed cases of COVID-19. A week later, on the 27th, there were over 100,000. As the number of cases escalate by a factor of 10, the word of the prophecy is telling us that God's desire is for all bones to be made alive. But the common good of all people is what matters. And in a sense, it's what is undermining or-- not undermining, but underlining our staying separate for a while because while we may not want to do it, we're doing it for the common good and for our own. As I was speaking about this tension between the common good and profit and power and reflecting on the story of these ventilators being scuttled, [inaudible] came to Romans, the passage that Karen read. And I thought, "What if we change the translation? What if we take the contemporary situation and put it into the text?" In a sense, what happens when we take the news and the gospel, the good news, and we put them together? This is my retranslation of Romans 8. To set the mind on profit and power alone is death, but to set the mind on the common good is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on profit and power alone is hostile to God's desire. It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. And those who are focused on profit and power alone cannot please God. But you are not about profit and power alone. You are also about the common good since the common good dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the common good within them does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin and greed, the common good, the breath of God that Ezekiel prophesize about is life because of righteousness. If the common good of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the common good that dwells in all of you.

May not be the world's best translation of a passage of Paul in Romans, but it underlines the importance of that which is often overlooked or forgotten in our society. The idea that God wants all people to be well. And when we think about scripture, this shouldn't surprise us. A Samaritan helps someone who's been beaten up, the woman at the well, the blind man, the lepers, all the outcasts that Jesus touches and ministers to and restores throughout the gospels. When I was in seminary I heard that Jesus had a preferential option for the poor. Now I wonder if it's a preferential option for the common good of all people.

So as I was wrestling with this tension, wrestling with how to present it, with what to say today, I found a bit of amazingly good news, especially for hockey-obsessed St. Louis Blues fans. Bauer, the company that makes face shields for hockey helmets, has stopped production and instead has begun mass production of Bauer medical face shields. The top of the shield is blue, which I'm sure is a coincidence, and it says Bauer Medical Supply or something like that. A company involved in a sport that we all love because of the Blues has decided to halt its production of its core product and begin doing something for the common good. I for one am thankful that this company is doing that, that other companies are doing what they can because I continue to believe that it is only when we work together will we get through this quicker. God bless all of you as you do your part to promote the common good. Amen.