

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Being God’s Merciful People”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 10, 2020

John 14:1-14

‘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.

1 Peter 2:2-10

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 marvellous 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.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our lives to you and to the ministry and presence of your Holy Spirit within us, among us, and through us. We pray that your spirit would in this moment take all that we are thinking and feeling and wondering about, our worries our cares, our joys, and our sorrows. Take all of that and the words we've heard from Scripture, the gospel, and from Peter, the songs that we have heard and sung, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all of this and transform it into your word for us. The word of Christ speaking to each of us as we have need this day. We pray this because of Christ's faithfulness to us, to all people, and to you. So, let it be so. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

In the Gospel of John that Tom just read, Jesus makes one of his more famous "I am" statements. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is what Jesus says. And if you were to ask a group of people, "What does Jesus say about himself?" One of the answers will be that he says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In fact, there was a group of 100 five-year-olds who attended a Christian kindergarten and they were asked the question, "Who is it that's going to always show you the way, tell you the truth, and encourage you to live a good life?" And all hundred of them answered the same thing without a moment's hesitation. "Mommy," not Jesus.

So, on this Mother's Day, we celebrate all of you who are moms. Who care for and provide for and direct and encourage and support your children. Thank you. Thank you not just from me or from the Church, but from God who through you ministers the way, the truth, and the life in ways that I know I will never understand or be able to capture. On this Mother's Day, we say thank you for all the ways you embody the presence of Christ and the Spirit in your family, in your community, and in what you do and say. And it's not just in the Gospel of John that we get this hint of the power of mothers or the story from the kindergarteners, but we also get it from 1 Peter, who encourages his people to seek after the spiritual milk that can nourish and sustain them. A child seeks out his mother for that milk. A milk that will help him or her grow--help that child be the person that they are because it's not just the literal milk that a mother gives their child, but the milk of wisdom and encouragement and support throughout that child's entire life. So again, mothers, thank you for all that you do. This morning on cnn.com there was a story about mothers. The headline was something about offering cereal for dinner and needing to hide in the laundry room. Mothers are under tremendous pressure, especially

in this time of quarantine. In fact, I had a conversation with one mother this week who shared about how hard it is for her to be the center of her family. She's got children that are homeschooling, older kids who are back home, a husband who's working from home, and everything that goes on in the family, all the emotional energy and dramas and the hurts and the worries. Everyone is coming to her to be comforted and encouraged in the way, the truth, and the life. In a sense, she is the regulating center of that family. She is the foundation and stability of who they are and what they do right now. But her question was profound. She asked quite simply, "Where do I go for help? Who do I turn to for support?" She was not flippant asking these questions. She was serious.

And as the story in CNN mentioned, that some moms just go and hide in the laundry room in order to find that center again for themselves. So I want to encourage all the mothers who are watching today and the fathers and the grandparents, but especially the moms, to take care of yourselves in this time. Do what you need to do to be spiritually nourished and fed. Do what you need to do to find equilibrium in your life with all of its regular demands and all of those demands that are heightened because of the pandemic. Whatever it is that you need to do, take care of yourself so that God through you can continue to care for all those in your lives who are so dependent on you. And just for your own well-being, not because they need you--take care of yourself so that you know that deep abundant life-giving love that comes from God for you. Peter talks in the passage about people who are essentially nobody who God says they are now a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Those folks are chosen for a purpose to do what God wants them to do and the passage goes on and mentions that they are to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called them. And I was thinking about how mothers might proclaim the mighty acts of God and how different that is from when I think about or hear that phrase, "proclaim the mighty acts of God." When I hear it I think about putting on this robe, standing in that pulpit or here, espousing upon Scripture and trying to find God's truth for all of us and the image that came to me was of a mom and her kids gathered around a kitchen center island. And mixing bowls were all over the place. And they were stirring cookie dough, getting ready for it to go into the oven and how easy it is for all of us to dismiss how that is a mighty act, a proclamation of the mighty act of God, loving those kids, being with them, and encouraging them. That led me to think about the quote that is attributed to Saint Benedict, "Preach the Gospel always. And when necessary use words." This quote is often shared from the pulpit, from the table, in churches all over the place. And I was surprised to learn this week that the serious scholars of Benedict claimed he never said those words. They truly describe who he was and what he did. But Benedict was not afraid to use words. Although not a priest, he was given special dispensation from Rome to proclaim the Gospel in churches. And between Sundays, he would be an itinerant preacher and gather people wherever he could. In a field, in a barn, in a building, in a town square, he would be there and he would be proclaiming the Gospel in words. He would also go to the parties of the rich and popular in his community, the people that he associated with before his conversion. He would talk to them. But what struck them the most was his example, how he lived his life for others proclaiming the Gospel of Good News and encouraging everyone to trust in the work of Jesus Christ in their lives. So when we say that Benedict said, "Preach the Gospel always. When necessary use words," we are capturing the essence of Benedict. And in this time of our lives, in this post-Christianity that we live in where truth is now up for debate whether it's true or false and Empirical facts no longer have validity, our true claims are even more suspect when we use words to describe them. And I think all of us can take examples from our mothers. All the ways that they put love into action in our lives. And what it might mean for us to live our lives in that way and to do simple and sometimes difficult acts of kindness that communicate that God loves that child. I know for myself over the

past weeks, getting cards from you, for my hand, my finger, but also just the cards that are encouraging to us on staff. How much these live stream services mean to you.

Those cards are acts of love that come through the mail and touch us in ways that are profound, and we thank you for those. But again, I want to encourage you to think about the way that moms act, and how we might emulate that in the lives of others who are around us. Peter continues, “once you were no people but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.” I've loved this passage for as long as I've been a Christian. The idea that before you trusted and believed you were a nobody. And now, by an act of mercy, an act of love, an act of acceptance, you are now somebody.

And not just somebody, you're God's body. And I've loved it so much because of what it meant to me. That this vacuous life I was leading, trying to be successful, wearing fancy clothes, and driving a BMW, and thinking I was all that and then some...how all of that just evaporated once I truly committed to Christ. I still like nice things, but I don't have that wretched desire inside anymore. It says that once we receive mercy, we now need to own that mercy. We've got it so why not share it?

In a sense, how might we become the embodiment of mercy? And I laugh because I remember years ago taking an online test of my spiritual gifts, and I got a zero on mercy-giving. I think I've learned since then to at least have a little bit of mercy. To not only trust that it's for me but to be able to offer it to others. And I think about all the people, who in this time of quarantine, are offering mercy. I think about the nurses that are caring for all of the patients who have COVID-19 or other situations in hospitals. How important they are because visitors are not allowed in hospitals. People go in and feel disconnected and isolated. And there are nurses who are literally putting their lives on the line caring for those patients. I think about my neighbor Steve, who lives right next door. A fireman for Rock Hill. And how he continues to go to work and to provide the kind of care that fireman offer in times of medical emergency, or accidents, or fires.

I think about all the moms who continue to be the centering presence of their families' lives, who continue to be the emotional support and the loving encouragers for their families and their friends. Especially when their kids, or their spouses, or their friends need a kind word or an encouraging pick me up. Mothers are there doing the kind of work that God has invited them to do. To share mercy in a particular way. And my hope is that all of you mothers have a great Mother's Day. That all of you feel love. All of you feel encouragement and support. All of you can just sort of sit back for a moment and be thankful for the calling that you have. And for the way, the wonderful way that you fulfilled it. And I hope that you and all of us find time just to breathe. To get the support that we all need. And to carry on the work that God is calling us to do. God is not calling us to be nobodies. God is calling us to embody mercy, grace, love, and peace in this world. God is calling all of us to be the body of Jesus Christ now and for as long as we have life. So, let us all be faithful in that calling and happy Mother's Day. Amen.