

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Jesus’ Prayer for Us”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

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. We pray on this last Sunday of the season of Easter that your spirit would take all of the words and prayers and the songs, all that we are, all that we have, and would by the power that it has to transform and call forth new life transform these words, my words, our words into your word. The word of Christ, the word that glorifies and gives eternal life. A word that comforts your people. A word that calls us into ministry. A word that challenges us. Let this be your word. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen. Before I begin my sermon, I would invite you to join with me in a moment of silence. A time when we can honor the men and women who have served our country and who lost their lives in that service. Please join with me.

Holy God, we give you thanks for the sacrifices of these men and women who died protecting our freedoms, who fought for our way of life. And we pray for them and their families for the sacrifices that have been made, for the price that has exacted upon their families. And we also pray this day for all the men and women who are currently serving. May you watch over and protect them. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

As Karen read from the book of Acts, the disciples of Jesus continued to gather together and pray. And in the reading from the Gospel of John, in a sense, it's one long prayer that Jesus offers. Jesus, who is preparing to transition from his life on Earth to being in heaven with God, is asking God to watch over and protect the people who trust in God so that they might be one as Jesus and God the Father are one. Prayer, faith, worshipping together, all of these elements that are in the gospel story and in the book of Acts and are the essence and foundation of our faith have been in the news because on Friday, President Trump declared that the *governors need to do the right thing and deemed churches very important essential places of faith to open right now for this weekend and if they don't do it, he will override the governors. And America, we need more prayer, not less.*

I couldn't agree more with the president. We need more prayer, not less. Prayer is that foundation, the aspect of our faith. It is the essence of our relationship through the spirit with Christ and with one another. And in this time of distancing and virtual worship, we know how important prayer is. How essential it is to our daily life, our faith expression, our own well-being and the health of our community of faith and our communities in general. Prayer is that important. But insofar as opening the churches this weekend, in a sense, I couldn't disagree more with the president. Not exactly sure what turmoil that statement caused in the lives of many of the faith leaders around the country as they hear this declaration from the president laid out on a Friday and have to scramble if they want to honor that declaration to be open today.

But when I heard that comment from the president as related to the news, the first thing that came to my mind was a polity class at Princeton Seminary. All of us had to take it. It was two hours a week. Many of us considered it a throwaway class because it met on Monday nights. It was fun. We would laugh and talk, and we would learn a little bit, it seemed, but the teacher of that class was a retired Executive Presbyter in the area near Princeton Seminary. And he did a remarkable work because, I believe, edged in the soul and mind of every person who went to that class is one thing and one thing alone who has the authority to make this decision. In a sense, our Presbyterian polity or governance or the way we live together always comes down to that question: Who gets to decide? So in the face of the presidential proclamation to open the churches, I know that for our church and the churches in our Presbytery--the Presbyterian churches around the country, unfortunately, for the president, he does not have that authority. His declaration has prompted our Presbyterian leader here in the Giddings Lovejoy Presbytery to offer this in response, The Reverend Doctor Craig Howard wrote, 'I want to encourage you to stay the course you've already set.' I've been amazed at the energy, intelligence, imagination that our sessions and churches have poured into their ministry continuation plans and online worship. Worship and mission are happening safely. I commend the leaders of our congregations for the innovative ways they have kept church happening. Please don't feel pressured into hasty reopenings as a result of this announcement. Continue to discern what it means to be the body of Christ in this time. continue to consider who compromises the body of Christ and the value of all their diversity, including that of age, health, and ability. What does it mean to be the body if we choose to move forward knowing that many members of the body have to opt-out? Continue to care and prioritize the least of these in your discernments and continue to follow the guidelines of the CDC." And then he goes on to quote one of the foundational elements of our faith as Presbyterians that "God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to God's word or beside it in matters of faith and worship. Therefore, we consider the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion as universal and unalienable. We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security and at the same time, be equal and common to all others." He concludes his letter, "It is our Sessions, comprised of elected leaders together with their ministers who together make decisions regarding the life and worship of congregations as well ministries and mission engagement with the world. The Session alone is

responsible to do so in ways that respects the congregation's fidelity to the word of God as well as promotes its safety and well-being." So in our system, the Session, the 24 elected elders from the congregation and Karen and I, get to decide corporately what our church will and will not do.

A couple weeks ago, we formed a task force to consider what it is that we here at First Pres Kirkwood would do in the near future and even in the next several months. And those discussions are ongoing. The committee has met several times to look at what we should do for the summer, and then we'll meet again in a couple weeks to begin looking at the fall. The recommendations of the committee will need to go to the Session to be talked about, prayed over, and approved. But at this time, the things that seem pretty much agreed to is that we'll continue to worship virtually throughout the summer, that we would be able to offer memorial services online with eulogists present if the family chooses to do so, and that we'll be able to do internments in the courtyard to allow for families to lay to rest their loved ones. These recommendations are going to go to the Session, and in this coming week, they will vote on whether or not to abide by those or to change them. We don't know what they'll do as they are free in their conscience to do as they feel God sees fit for us. But there is work going on with this committee. The Session has met once already to begin discussions about all these things. So, I want you to know that we are taking the reopening question very seriously. Some of the things that have been brought up over and over again are as we sit here in this space, if you were here today, would be to wear masks and sit six or more feet apart. No touching anything, especially a hymnal. No singing. Not celebrating the sacraments. Just sitting and listening. Not being able to pass the sign of peace. No hugging. No kissing. No handshakes. No nothing. And we've come to realize as a staff is that that really isn't worship. It's not even something that's life-giving as we imagine it. We know it would be nice to be together. We know it would be nice to spend time here in this beautiful space and feel the organ as it vibrates playing beautiful music. To hear the singing resound around the room and into our hearts and souls. But we have to understand the bigger picture and the deeper issues and I can tell you that all of us on staff and in the reopening task force and on Session are most concerned about safety and keeping everybody healthy. While we want to be back together to offer our prayers and sing our songs and hear summons and be in fellowship right now, we've decided to stay apart physically so that we can be together in spirit and in the future we can be together physically in the same space, healthy and hopefully with this pandemic behind us.

Craig Howard's letter talked about anxiety that spiritual leaders are feeling and stresses that they have when it comes to reopening. There have been many articles written in the papers and on websites about the reasoning behind the churches not wanting or wanting to reopen. Some claim that it's political. Others say that it's their right under the constitution. The separation of church and state. The churches can decide, not the state. There is a reason that for some churches it's a financial matter or a survival matter because without congregants in the pews there's no income or dramatic drop in income and I can tell you from my part and Karen's and Bill's, and all of us on staff, we are so incredibly grateful for your continued financial support of the ministry. Your continued participation in it. Ministry is happening every day by phone call, email, virtual meetings, and planning meetings. All of these things are happening and all of it done differently because of a pandemic. But you always have to remember that we only see the tip of the iceberg when we're together in worship. That what the church does Monday through Saturday, day in and day out, week after week, year after year, is mostly unseen by the congregation except for those aspects that you do and we're keenly aware that you continue to do what you do by giving food to Kirkcare. By continuing to write letters and send emails of encouragement to family and loved ones. The church is always the church and it never stops functioning. It just doesn't function together during this pandemic. So as much as the president desires for the churches to reopen, I applaud that desire. But sending a mandate of doing it this weekend seems-- well, you can add whatever adjective you want to add.

Our Presbyterian leaders and the leaders of this congregation have decided what they want to do, and we're going to move forward cautiously. And the reason we're going to do it is not done in isolation from the facts or data, but we're doing it in coordination with healthcare workers who are in huge systems in our area--BJC, Mercy, St. Luke's, St. Claire's, SSM--all of them are talking as part of this reopening Task Force about how important it is for us to do the right thing. And I want to offer just a couple of things to think about as you are dealing with this invitation to reopen, and the uncertainty of what it is the future will look like in the short term.

In my home state of Washington on March 10th, the Skagit Valley Chorale got together for a two-and-a-half-hour practice at the Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church. Half the choir, 60 people showed up for that practice. Three weeks later, 45 of them tested positive for COVID-19. Three were hospitalized in serious condition, and two of those choir members had passed away. In Houston, Texas, a Catholic Church, the Holy Ghost Parish, reopened for services on May 2nd. 79-year-old Pastor Darnell Kirschner passed away last week. He was diagnosed with pneumonia, but healthcare officials are wondering if he didn't have the virus instead. Five of their leaders and five of their clergy tested positive, and they followed strict protocols and never had more than 20% of the congregation in worship together at one time.

A rural church in Arkansas where a pastor and his wife attended events in early March, 35 of 92 attendees are tested positive for the coronavirus, and 3 people passed away. An additional 26 people and a death occurred in the community where that church was located, and they traced it back to the church and to the pastors who were positive. You may have seen the headlines over the weekend that at a Baptist church in Frankfurt, people gathered on May 10th. Again, they followed strict protocols. They had hand sanitizer, masks, and were far apart. Six of those people that had gathered were infected and taken to the hospital. And they have again closed services after 10 days of being together. Catoosa Baptist Tabernacle in Ringgold, Georgia, like many places of worship in Georgia, had switched to holding online services and were anxious to get back together. And so in late April, the officials decided to reopen the doors for in-person services. Two weeks later, the church canceled its services because some members, a significant number, contracted the virus.

We do not want to be one of those churches. We do not want to be a church that opens its doors too soon and risk our community of faith getting sick and potentially giving that to others. We're thankful for the online streaming service that we have and for the opportunity that it provides us. And we're thankful that our prayer and the prayer of Christ for us and for all people who believe is what is holding us together. Christ prays for God to protect those who believe. And in an article this morning on CNN's website that talks about the reasoning behind churches reopening, it lists as one of the major reasons that churches believe God will protect them from the virus. I wish that were true. I wish that faith would protect us from a virus. I wish that faith would protect us from table saws, from cancer, from pneumonia, from dementia, from Parkinson's, from every affliction that all of us have. I wish faith would protect us but it doesn't. We're human. Life happens. Biology happens. Accidents happen. But through it all, we know that we're in this together. So, whether we have cancer or a Parkinson's diagnosis or some other health issue, whether we're struggling with depression or we're hurting, whether we're stupid and do crazy things in our garages, no matter what, we're in this together. And just as Christ said, He's with us and God is with us. Amen.