

“The Family of God”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture — ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ — we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Mark 3:20-35

And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’ — for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

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, the images, the worries, the joys that each of us carry within. I pray that you would take the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture. I pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer and in silence. And I pray that you would take the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. Let that word do its work in us, among us, and through us. Let that word nurture and encourage our faith. Let it guide our actions and our love and care for those in need. Let it challenge us where we are too comfortable, and let it comfort us where we are hurting or in grief. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So I don't know about her office, but Karen did mention to me that yesterday she and Scott started to clean out their garage, and that was after I told her that Jani and I had started to clean out our garage the week before. Apparently, it's a pastoral thing this time of year, this spring cleaning thing, is you head out to the garage and

you start to haul out all of the junk that has accumulated, at least for us, over the years. We went to Home Depot, bought a Bagster, the big green bag that you can stick out at the end of the driveway and fill with whatever you can, and then they magically come and lift it up and carry it away. We had an old bookcase that we used as a planter, rusted out and falling apart, an untold number of old pieces of furniture that were broken, some packing material that only the Lord knows how long has been in that garage, an old mirror and some tools. You name it. If it was in the wrong spot, it went out to the Bagster. And the funny thing was as we put the stuff out by the Bagster, we also had some old, plastic Adirondack chairs that I wanted to get rid of because we had one red one, two grey ones, and a blue one. I don't know why, but I thought they should all be the same color. So we stuck them out there, and low and behold the next day they were gone before the Bagster left. And then one of our neighbors decided that they wanted to get rid of some electronics, so they put those in the Bagster. And my wife wasn't very happy about that because she read the rules, and one of the first rules was no electronics. So we put the electronics on the grass, and when the Bagster people came they took the Bagster and, miracle of miracles, they took all the electronics that we had lined up on the grass as well.

So today, or this week apparently, is the season of cleaning out the garages. And what I want to talk to you about is how this might be an invitation for all of us, not just to clean out our garages, but to be mindful of what we need to do to make space within our lives to allow the spirit of God to continue to be at work in our hearts and in our minds and in our actions. What might we need to do in our own souls to clear enough space to allow the spirit of God to continue to dance, to dance freely, to not be impeded or impinged by the clutter that we bring into our lives or that we allow to sit at the margin of our lives because it's just too hard or too stressful or too painful or we just want to do something else? We don't want to deal with the junk. It's easier just to leave it be. But as we found out at home, when the pathway from the garage door to the back door is barely wide enough for you to fit in, it might be time to clean up.

So the invitation for us as Christians, and to me, from both of the scriptures is, what is it that we might be invited to clean up in order to make space to allow the spirit to dance more freely within us and for us to then dance in this world in the ways of grace and mercy? From 2nd Corinthians, something that is sort of near and dear to my heart these days, is the 2nd part of the passage where it says that, "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature's being renewed day by day. This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what we can see but what we cannot see. What we see is temporary, but what we cannot see is eternal." In a sense, I believe that Paul is telling the Corinthians, "You know what? Life is tough and as you get older your body just simply falls apart." I'm surprised that the people with the corsages did not give me an Amen there. I'll try it one more time. I said, "As you grow older your body starts to fall apart!" Amen! Yeah, ugh [laughter].

And it doesn't even take being old to have your body tell you it's in charge and not you. But it always amazes me that whenever I go and see someone in the hospital, especially when they have something really serious going on, they're hooked up to machines, the IV's are pumping medicines and fluids, and all of those kinds of things are going on. Even in the midst of all of that stress, that physical stress and pain and discomfort, the twinkle of the eye is always still there, almost always until the very, very end when maybe that person shuts their eyes and doesn't open them again. There is something within us, the spirit of life that is light and hope and peace, and no matter what our afflictions, that light, hope, and peace still lives within us. Whether we're over 100 or in our 90s or 80s or 70s, the sparkle, if you will, is still there. As the scripture says, "We do not lose heart. We do not lose hope. We do not lose faith. We do not lose that confidence that we have in what God is doing in our lives." And so one of the things that we at times need to actually pay attention to and move from a distracting place in our life, to maybe get it out by the curb, is our physical afflictions.

Have you ever run into someone who's kind of that woe-is-me person, where you ask them how are they doing, and the list of afflictions is ominous and wady and unending and you think to yourself, "Why did I ask?" That person has all of their afflictions at the center of their being, and I think the invitation that I hear, and again I might be a little warped in hearing it this week, is that there are times when we need to simply take out the trash, to not focus on those things that hurt or aren't working but instead to trust and to make that space, to realize and remember that God's goodness still resides within each of us.

The second thing that the scriptures are inviting us to lay on the curb at times might be even more difficult than our physical ailments. Jesus says some extraordinary things when his mother and his brothers - and I believe the correct translation would be his siblings - come. They want to help Jesus. They're concerned about him, so they come to where he's at with all of his followers. They call out. The crowd hears the call. They pass it along. "Your mother and your siblings are outside. They're asking for you. They want to help you. They want to take you home." And Jesus says, "What? Who are my mother and my siblings except those who are right here in front of me? Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother." Jesus lays aside his biological family in order that he might be embraced by a different family, a family of followers. A family who we choose to be a part of, our brothers, and our sisters, our mother, our father, et cetera.

Now I don't know about you, but there are times in my life, again, when I come across people who have something going on in their family of origin that is so significant it is hard for them to be who God has made them to be. They have an issue with their mother, or their father, or their brother, or some significant adult that defines who they are. It takes up so much space within them that they cannot even see the spirit, let alone dance with it. Karen and I were talking earlier about people who we have known in our lives that cause that kind of pain for us. And the image that came is the image of someone taking a hot branding iron and just sort of pushing it on you and it hurts for a while and you can say, "Stop," and, "Get out. Be done with me," and yet that mark that they have caused is always there.

I've shared this story before, but it's worth retelling. The young woman that I counseled in my first church in Pennsylvania, whose father said to her one evening when she got home really late and had coasted the car down the gravel driveway all the way into the garage, and barely quietly shut the door and snuck up onto the back porch only to find him standing in the doorway. She looked at him in horror and all he said to her was, "I am so ashamed of you." [inaudible]. Those words were branded into her soul. And she didn't just think that her father was ashamed of her, she thought that God too was ashamed of her. I'm convinced that he did not intend to bring that level of shame to her. I think he was trying to communicate with her his displeasure in the moment, but what he did lived on in her. It guided her thoughts and her actions and how she looked at the world. And what I realized that Jesus is saying is making a way for her and for us who have similar types of experiences to lay aside those hurts, to lay aside the things that our mothers, our brothers, our fathers, our sisters, our friends, our trusted advisors, if you will, have said to us that have caused us deep soul-crushing pain. We can lay that aside, take it to the curb, and we can choose now who is part of our family.

One of the greatest things that I've loved about the build up to General Assembly, I don't know if you've heard about it, but it's a meeting coming this next week, and we are having people come and join us on that first Sunday for worship on June 17--70 I think is the number. There will be a busload of people. And one of the things that I was able to do was get a list of who's coming here. Now some of the people that I know from my past I was aware of would be on the list. Laurie Krause, who's preached here before is on the list. Rob Murrow, who is a young man whose wife and kids started ministering when Jani and I did near Pittsburgh. And then I saw a name that completely took me back. I saw the name Mary Jane Finney, who was the mother of a child that I had in my youth group when I was a student at Princeton Seminary doing youth ministry one day a week

in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. His name was Huck, Huck Finney [laughter]. You can't forget that no matter how hard you try. But as I looked at her name and then looked at her Facebook page and started to sort of reconnect with the past and all of the memories and all of the work that we did and how much of a fun person she is, how spontaneous and positive and happy she is, I realized that in a very real concrete way, she is a distant relative of mine, through the faith, not by blood, but by faith. And it put a joyous smile on my face, and I look forward to welcoming her to worship with us next Sunday. Not someone that I was born to be connected with but someone for whom the spirit has decided, this is family for you, and it's a blessing to have these people in our lives.

I'd like to conclude by reading the lyrics of one of the greatest hymns I think that was ever written. I will try my darndest not to break into song. It's "Come and Find the Quiet Center", and to me it captures this sense of laying aside our afflictions and laying aside the hurts, those deep hurts that sometimes our family or our friends have inflicted upon us, in order just to make space for God's spirit to do its work. "Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead. Find the room for hope to enter. Find the frame where we are freed. Clear the chaos and the clutter. Clear our eyes that we can see all the things that really matter be at peace and simply be. Silence is a friend who claims us, cools the heat, and slows the pace. God it is who speaks and names us, knows our being face to face. Making space within our thinking, lifting shades to show the sun, raising courage when we're sinking, finding scope for faith begun. In the spirit let us travel, open to each other's pain. Let our loves and fears unravel. Celebrate the space we gain. There's a place for deepest dreaming. There's a time for heart to care. In the spirit's lively scheming, there is always room to spare." Amen.