

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
“Called to Welcome, Receive and Accept All People”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, June 28, 2020

**Psalm 13**

*To the leader. A Psalm of David.*

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long must I bear pain in my soul,*

*and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*

*How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

*Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!*

*Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,  
and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’;  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

*But I trusted in your steadfast love;*

*my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

*I will sing to the LORD,*

*because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

**Matthew 10:40-42**

*‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’*

Let us pray. Gracious God, we open ourselves in this time of worship to the ministry of your spirit. And I pray now that the spirit would take these words from scripture, the words from the Psalm, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, and especially the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share, and transform them into the living word of Christ. A word that can guide us, comfort us, heal us, challenge us, and move us forward as we seek to bring about your kingdom on this earth. I ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. So, it's kind of odd to preach on this theme of welcoming when before me lies this empty sanctuary and all of you are watching from home or from wherever you are in this time of social distancing. I had this sermon sort of mapped out in my head as I've worked on the worship sheet months ago. I had some notes and literally none of them are going to work this Sunday. Because the situation we find ourselves in is still ongoing, it's unique and challenging, to say the least. And I stand before you this Sunday with the reverberations of the murder of George Floyd still resonating around our land.

A time, a moment where it seems the collective consciousness was broken open, exposing the wounds that have caused our brothers and sisters of color, especially those in the African-American community, so much hurt and harm. A time when we are invited to look at things more clearly and be more attentive, especially when some of the things that we love and do unknowingly and unwittingly contribute to racism. In this portrayal of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as a xenophobic, racist, segregationist. Now I can hear you say, "Wait, wait, what? Jesus loves everyone! This is the song that I know. This is what I believe. This is what I hope for. This is what I trust." But let me tell you that in the passages that come just before this in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is anything but all-welcoming. Jesus talks about sending the disciples out to those who have the Hebrew faith only, the faith of Israel, to not go to anybody from Samaria or Canaan, to focus exclusively on those who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob don't go to the Gentiles, just to our people. And this is in chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew. It says all these exclusive, segregationist, racist kind of instructions just before it offers this beautiful passage of welcome, welcome, welcome. But if we're attentive, even in this passage there are hints about this xenophobic tendency in Jesus according to Matthew because it says whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous. Sounds great to our ear but if we stop for a minute, we realize that prophet and righteous person point to the faith of Israel, not the faith, or lack thereof, of the Gentiles. Just the Israelites. So even in this passage, that talks about welcoming everyone or so it would seem we see this tendency in Jesus. And I've got to be honest. I've never seen it before. I love this passage. It's one of those that I can spend days and weeks just meditating on and thinking about how do I welcome other people? Or in the Benedictine tradition how do I welcome Christ in others? All others, not just the ones that I chose. But unfortunately, in Matthew's story, Jesus here is not being all-inclusive. And it's not just looking at this passage and thinking about it that we kind of go wait a second. He's only talking about the people of Israel and no one else? It takes five more chapters until Jesus engages with a Canaanite woman who's begging for food and Jesus says, "No. I'm not here for you." He didn't listen to her. He completely ignored her. He told the disciples who were complaining about her, "Send her away," and because of her tenacity as an outsider striving to be included in a very exclusive club that Jesus finally says to her, "Wow. Your faith is amazing," and her daughter gets healed. In a sense, I believe this Canaanite woman helps Jesus wake up to his xenophobic, segregationist, racist sense of his mission on earth. And again these are not things we ever ascribe to Jesus but if you look at your Bible and read what comes just before this in the beginning of chapter 10 you realize that and Jesus has these tendencies, at least at this stage of his journey. And then it says after that, after the welcome and Jesus sends the disciples out, he goes down by the Sea of Galilee and goes up into the mountains and he sits down, again, not in our passage today but immediately after it. And I maybe creatively interpret that to Jesus sat down and began to examine some of the things that he had said and done. Why was he being so exclusive? Why was he being so racist? Why just the people of Israel and not everyone? He begins again to wake up. And this interpretation is informed by an article, an opinion piece by the president of Princeton University, Christopher

Eisgruber. He talks about the legacy of Woodrow Wilson and the call to take Wilson's name off of many important aspects of Princeton University, their school for public and international affairs, the name of a college, and the highest undergraduate award they give to alums. Wilson was an undergrad at Princeton. He served on the faculty. He served for a time as the president of the university and really is credited with bringing it from just a sleepy, old college into a modern sense of what a university is. He served as a governor of New Jersey, President of the USA, and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Woodrow Wilson was an amazing, accomplished person. But as president Eisgruber says, Wilson's achievements were phenomenal, but he also was a racist. He discouraged black applicants from applying to Princeton. While President of the US, he segregated the previously integrated federal civil service and moved the US backwards in its quest for racial justice and contributing to the systematic racism that continues to damage black lives in our country today.

And then the president goes to say, "And that, I now believe, is precisely the problem." Princeton is part of an America that has too often disregarded, ignored, and turned a blind eye to racism allowing the persistence of systems that discriminate against black people. When Derek Chauvin knelt for nearly nine minutes on George Floyd's neck while bystanders recorded his cruelty, he might have assumed that the system would disregard, ignore, or excuse his conduct as it had done in response to past complaints against him. In a sense, Princeton and its board of trustees realized that they needed to wake up, to not ignore the racist tendencies and practices and ideas that Woodrow Wilson had. And finally, they did that and removed his name from the School of Public and International Affairs from the college and from the prize that they give to undergrads. Princeton's not alone Throughout our nation, there's a lot of discussion about removing monuments of the Confederacy to celebrate the behavior and life and what they think is courage of these Confederate heroes. We've now come to see more clearly, that these monuments glorify white supremacy, moralize an unrecognized government whose founding principle was the perpetuation of slavery, and that the presence of these memorials over 100 years after the subjugation of the Confederacy continues to disenfranchise and alienate African Americans.

This was a time, the killing of George Floyd, when America began to wake up to the role that Confederate monuments have played and continue to play in our history. In Alabama, a law prohibiting the removal of historical monuments was deliberately broken by the mayor of Birmingham. The mayor said that the penalty fine was preferable to the unrest that would follow if the memorial was not removed. The governor of North Carolina removed three Confederate monuments at the North Carolina capital, that the legislature had, in effect, made illegal to remove. And the United States Army said it would rename Fort Bragg and its other military bases that are named for Confederate heroes. There are 10 of them. The US Navy and US Marines have decided to prohibit the display of the Confederate flag, even as bumper stickers on private cars.

About all this, Donald Trump said these monumental and very powerful bases have become part of a great America heritage, a history of winning victory and freedom. "The United States of America trained and deployed our heroes on these hallowed grounds and won two World Wars. Therefore, my administration will not even consider the renaming of these magnificent and fabled military installations." In response to that statement, Paul Mansoor, retired Army colonel and veteran of the Iraq war said, "Most serving soldiers know little history behind the Confederate leaders for whom these bases are named or the political deals that caused them to be honored in this fashion. There might be some pushback from a small segment of soldiers from the south, but this is what we like to call a teachable moment. Now is the time to finally bring about a change that will speak volumes to what the US Army stands for."

And David Petraeus, a retired four-star Army general said that the renaming move amounts to a war of memory and that before deciding to rename bases like Fort Bragg where he served the 82nd Airborne Division, the Army must be ready to follow its own procedures for such and he's quoted as saying, "The irony at training at bases made for those who took up arms against the United States and for the right to enslave others is inescapable to anyone paying attention. Now belatedly is the moment for us to pay such attention." I found it somewhat ironic that one of the bases, Fort Polk, near Leesville Louisiana, is named in honor of the Right Reverend Leonidas Polk, an episcopal bishop and a confederate general. It's time for us to wake up. And so, I come back to the texts and its context in the scripture. Jesus says, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." No Gentiles, no Samaritans, only Israelites. He says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I've come not to bring peace but a sword." So, there will be no peace on earth according to Matthew's depiction of Jesus. No Gentile, no Samaritans, only Israelites and no peace on earth.

And then this encounter that I mentioned with Jesus and the woman. She says, "Lord have mercy on me." And the text says that Jesus did not answer her, the disciples sent her away. Jesus says, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She came and knelt before him saying, "Lord help me." He answered, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

And then she said, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And finally, Jesus says, "Woman great is your faith." And then he goes and sits down. And I'm convinced that when he sat on that mountain by himself, he was scratching his head and thinking about, "How on earth could I have gotten this so wrong? I came to reach out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, to find their faith, to encourage it, to make it fulfilled and complete. And yet a woman from Cana has faith, more than the faith of those that I came to reach out to." And I'm convinced that it is in this moment that Jesus wakes up and realizes that the gospel of God, the promise of God is not just for the house of Israel but for all people. All people. People of color, people of differing sexual orientations. People of different genders, people of different nationalities, people. All people. So what I've come to realize is that we need to pay attention and be a little more critical of those passages that we love. And I've also come to realize that if Jesus can wake up, so can we. Amen.