



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
September 13, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

People of God, bless the Lord,
bless God’s holy name.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God’s steadfast love for us.

OPENING HYMN

The Church’s One Foundation

#321

CALL TO CONFESSION

As loving parents have compassion for their children, God has compassion for us. Confident in God’s love, let us confess our sins.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Loving God, we confess that we have failed to live in harmony with our sisters and brothers. We have been self-righteous in our attitudes, closed-minded in our beliefs, and judgmental in our opinions. We have shunned those whose ways we do not understand, and we have despised those who do not endorse our convictions. Forgive our sins of discord and conceit, and heal our divisiveness and quarreling. Help us to be charitable in our regard for others that we may dwell in peace with Christ, who is Lord of all. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Friends, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit open our understanding that we may receive the Word of life. Amen

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 103:1-13

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

New Testament Reading: Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

SERMON

"Helping in Crisis"

Rev. David Ukropina

Ten or twenty years from now, if someone says "the year 2020", I think I'm going to shudder. If you said today "the year 1997", or similar years, I wouldn't have any particular reaction, but 2020 just seems different. Between a pandemic, divisive politics, murder hornets! and now catastrophic fires that have ripped apart lives, taken people's homes, destroyed towns and places of cherished memories, I think we're all ready for 2020 to be over.

As we turn to today's lectionary text, the subject matter can initially seem trivial by comparison. In the very first verse of today's lectionary text from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul warns the congregation about quarreling over opinions. The specific issues he discusses may initially seem a long way away from us, but the connection and relevance to our lives as Christians, as church members, and as citizens is immediate and very contemporary.

Paul begins by talking about different views between those who eat only vegetables versus those who eat anything. Now, this is not an ancient dialogue or argument about vegetarianism. While scholars differ in terms of what the actual argument is here, it's helpful to remember what was going on during the time period.

Remember that Paul is writing to the church in Rome, which is not too long after the time of Jesus, and the Roman congregation was likely a mixture of Jewish and gentile believers. It's possible that some believers were still holding to Jewish dietary restrictions, while others felt those should be set aside.

It's also possible that some objected to eating the meat of animals who had already been offered in pagan sacrifices. Whatever the case, there is clearly some dissension and arguing going on within the congregation in terms of opinions being held by parishioners, and Paul is trying to mediate between the groups.

Besides what to eat, Paul also addresses opinions about various days that some judge as better than others. This may be a reference to festival days of the pagan world, or it could be a reference to Jewish festival days. Either way, Paul is urging the parishioners not to despise others for their opinions, or to pass judgment on them.

The main argument that Paul makes in the passage from Romans is that if people are doing what they are doing for the sake of the Lord, then they should not be complaining about one another. Instead of judging one another and despising one another over opinions like what to eat and what days to value most, they should look up at God, and not spend time hating one another for their opinions.

The main danger that Paul is warning against here is the danger of self-righteousness. It's the danger of making one's convictions the measure of validity of the convictions of others. In this particular case, the opinions over what to eat and what days to value are in danger of disrupting the community of the faithful.

Notice here that Paul does not condemn either group, no matter which side they wind up on, over eating or valuing certain days. Paul does not take sides in the dispute. Instead, Paul opposes the attempt of one group to make its convictions the sole measure of a true and faithful response to God.

Paul is telling the parishioners that servants of God should not be criticized for their opinions and their practices. He tells them that practices may differ, but they grow from a common root, and its ultimately God, and not parishioners, who decides and who ultimately judges these matters.

Again, the big danger here is the propensity within groups of people to have one group impose its understanding of faith upon all others. Paul is seeking tolerance within the community of faith. This does not mean that anything goes, or one opinion is as good as the next one. There are some things that we should object to on moral grounds, but we should always seek tolerance of the opinions of others.

Now putting it that way, it sounds easy to do, and the arguments over what to eat or what festival days to value seem far away. In a similar way, some of the arguments among Christians over the centuries over things like how to understand the theology of communion can seem far

away and not so important to us today.

But the fact is that Christians have fought over and sometimes died over issues like these in the past, and its not hard to look around today and find an endless list of things people fight about in the church or outside the church, or things from secular society and politics that find their way into church arguments and church fights.

Its easy for me to rattle off a list such as abortion, ordination of women, race, evolution, homosexuality, capital punishment, styles of worship, universalism, authority of scripture, communion. These are all things that churches and Christians have fought over intensely. Some of them are more recent than others, but all have been intense issues.

Now, we could take this train of thought in a lot of directions, whether about society, church, or pastors. In my own case, I have tried not to make my personal political or social or even church beliefs the focus of attention in sermons, classes I've led, or newsletter articles. This has been for many reasons, but some of them are guided by Paul's reasoning.

First, I ultimately want us to agree in the Lord, as does Paul. We can all have our own views, but our primary connection and focus should be on the centrality of Christ. I often describe myself as being Christocentric, because in church, liberals, moderates and conservatives can all find a common centrality in Christ. As one pastor put it, the church will hold at its center.

I also never want to be a stumbling block, especially in worship, to good and faithful Christians who may hold opinions different than mine. I believe that Christians of good conscience can come to different conclusions about important religious, social and political views of the time.

I was thinking about all these things, as have all of you, as I've been thinking non-stop this week about the horrific fires in Oregon and throughout the west. Like you, I've read the headlines about how more than 500,000 Oregonians have had to evacuate or prepare for it due to the fires, and we've been trying to coordinate and track with parishioners who have been in harm's way.

Marta and see what a huge crisis this has been for everyone in Oregon and the people we know and love, and for the people of Westminster. We have all been so moved by stories of loss, grief and tragedy, and we pray that God will help comfort and bind us all together in both a shared grief and comfort.

There's not much I could say or write that you have not thought or felt already. Many of you have suffered through this in ways that we have not, and I feel that many of you should be the ones talking to us. However, there was one thought that I did want to lift up out of all of this, and that's the way we see people helping other people in the middle of crisis.

I recently preached a sermon that talked about Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister and creator of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. Although he was not the only one to say this, he is well known today for telling children and adults that when there is a crisis, we should always look for the helpers, and notice those people that are trying to make a difference.

That's what's been on my mind so much this past week is stories of neighbors helping neighbors, and people looking out for others. There are stories of folks being saved by firefighters or people who happened to drive by at the right moment. Those stories have moved all of us as they have moved me.

Given the lectionary text this week, I had planned on writing about tolerance within the community of faith and how we should all try to practice mutual tolerance and understanding of different opinions and viewpoints within the congregation. However, in light of this crisis we have all faced, that seemed suddenly like a small topic.

Still, it does seem to connect with the wildfires in at least one way. As neighbor was helping neighbor, and servants helping those in need, I noticed that a lot of our usual divisions of opinions and viewpoints have tended to fall away. As one person helps another escape a raging fire, you don't hear them saying first, "Wait. Are you a Democrat? Are you a Republican?"

You do hear rumors of people of different political movements starting fires, but those seem small compared to everyday people, probably of very different beliefs, just stopping to help each other with an evacuation or providing a meal or a comforting phone call. I imagine plenty of conservatives and liberals have helped each other over this past week, and grieved together.

I remember hearing a sermon illustration of two parents sitting in an emergency room waiting to hear results of life-threatening operations being performed on their children. The preacher then said how ridiculous it would seem if one turned to the other and asked, "What political party are you?" In the case of a crisis, who cares? In a way, that's all of us right now.

There's something about a crisis and a tragedy, as with the fires up and down the west, that have a tendency to bring people together in common understanding and humanity. You saw this some after 9/11, which may be on my mind as today is the 19th anniversary of that horrible event. For a while at least, it seemed like all of us were united in community.

I recently read a powerful article in *The Week* magazine, which I subscribe to. It regularly includes articles from both the left and right, politically. The main editor, William Falk, wrote an article called *Harnessing Hate*. I'm tempted to quote the whole article, but I do want to share some major parts of it.

In the article, he writes, "Historian Henry Adams once defined politics as 'the systematic organization of hatreds.' It was true in the Civil War era, and just as true today. In 2020, who you hate is who you are. Voters are largely driven by what they're against rather than what they're for. Political scientists call this phenomenon negative partisanship, and its dominance has been on full display at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions..."

It's a far cry from Ronald Reagan's shining city on a hill or Obama's hope and change, but as political scientist Rachel Bitecofer observes, 'Partisanship is a hell of a drug, especially when it's cut with a heavy dose of existential fear.' It's hard to dispute the point. Both Democrats and Republican partisans, research has found, have come to despise the other tribe and their elected leaders more than they like their own leaders."

Now I know Paul's main focus is on opinions in church, but with the current news headlines, I could not help but draw the line from there to here. What I would question, and what Paul questions, is do you really want to primarily be organized by hating other people? Are you mostly organized around your anger, or what you are for?

My bottom line is something I've said before. If we call ourselves Christians, our behavior has to look something like Jesus. While we are all invited to let Christ inform our personal, political and social views, this also involves praying for, forgiving, and ultimately loving those who have different views than we do.

I'm beginning to think more and more that the really important divide in life and in society is not so much between right and left, but between self-righteousness and humility. Paul's own major concern, in this Romans passage and elsewhere, is the spirit of Christians, not the rightness of their positions.

As Christians, we need to see in every other person a child of God, never beyond the reach of God's grace. Good and faithful Christians can come to different conclusions. The future

of our churches and perhaps our country, depends on us doing this. Just like the way people come together in a crisis to help, support, and lift one another up, regardless of their views, we need to seek to do this always. When we do this, we will be closer to what Paul calls living our lives to the Lord. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from A Brief Statement of Faith

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Loving God, we pray for those who are sick or in trouble. Heal their disease, relieve their distress, and return to them the joy of salvation...

We pray for all who suffer the violence of war or natural disaster. Bring an end to violence that destroys human flourishing. Help us to live in peace with our neighbor and enable us to dwell in harmony with the earth...

We pray for children and for all who depend upon the support of others. Protect the vulnerable, shelter the weak, and give strength and wisdom to those who care for them. We pray especially today for the victims of fires in the west, and for firefighters and care providers...

We pray for leaders and elected officials. Stir up in them a desire for justice, enable them to fulfill their responsibilities with integrity, and drive from them any spirit of selfish gain...

We pray for pastors, teachers, and all the saints who lead your church. Grant them wisdom to know your truth and give them courage to live as faithful disciples of Jesus...

Loving God, you crowned us with steadfast love and mercy. Receive our prayers and help us to trust your goodness; through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

#65

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.
-Genesis, 31:49