

“Freedom from Fear”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
May 26, 2019**

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 63:7-9

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 2:14-18

It was Tuesday morning and the Rev. Larry Satorius and I were waiting to meet with the family to plan Nancy Esry’s memorial service. I showed him the bulletin board outside the Sanctuary that talks about our Discipleship Pathway.

Did you know we have a Discipleship Pathway? We do, and really we always have, and we’re always trying to do a better job of communicating it. Anyway, I showed Larry the header that says, “Your Next Step on the Discipleship Pathway.” I showed him each of the four steps outlined below it – one of them titled “Fellowship & Small Groups,” an Invitation to Go Deeper; another titled “Worship,” A Place to Find Comfort, Purpose, Affirmation and Inspiration; a third that says, “Christian Educations,” Being Equipped to Invite Others to Go Deeper; and the fourth that says, “Missions & Ministry Teams,” Making the World a Better Place. You can see all this after church in the entryway.

The point is, Larry was really taken by this effort of ours to put words and guidance behind what we hope we’ve always been doing, but maybe not realizing it and owning it as we could.

Larry was so taken by what I shared with him that Tuesday morning that on Friday, after Nancy’s memorial service, he thanked me, he pulled me aside and thanked me for showing him the bulletin board. He said he’d been thinking about all week long. He said it’s just what we need to be doing. Each of those Purpose Statements, he said, serves to connect people with one another, and that’s what’s really missing in the world today – heartfelt, meaningful, personal connections that transform our lives for the better.

Interestingly, that’s just what Jesus Christ gives to us as followers of the Christian faith – heartfelt, meaningful, personal connections with God and one another that transform our lives and our world for the better.

Our scripture lesson from Hebrews today points to the foundation of this connection we have with God and one another, a connection that exists only because of God’s love for us and God’s faithfulness to our wellbeing.

If there's one thing that we all have in common, one thing that connects us to one another and God, it's that we are all flesh and blood creatures, capable of faith in something greater than ourselves. We see this in Hebrews, where it says, "Since ... the children (of God) share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things...." – flesh and blood.

God did not come to use in some wistful vision or dream. God came to us in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. If it were not so, how could we have any real relationship with God!?! And without a real relationship with God, how can we hope to have a real and authentic relationship with one another.

I mean, there's always someone or something bringing us down and tearing us apart. Take for instance, the elderly man who was traveling with a boy and a donkey. As they walked through a village, the man was leading the donkey and the boy was walking behind. The townspeople said the old man was a fool for not riding. So to please them, he climbed up on the animal's back. When they came to the next village, the people said the old man was cruel to have the child walking while he enjoyed the ride. So to please them, he got off and set the boy on the animal's back. In the third village, people accused the child of being lazy for making the old man walk. So the man climbed on behind the boy and they rode off together. In the fourth village, the townspeople were indignant at the cruelty to the donkey, being made to carry two people! The frustrated old man was last seen going down the road carrying the donkey.

Apart from God, our lives are nothing but struggle and infighting. That's why Jesus came to us in the vulnerability of flesh and blood, to be just like us. He came, says Hebrews, "so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."

In other words, the only way we can overcome the struggle and infighting of being such vulnerable, flesh-and-blood creatures is to lay aside all our fears and to be unified in our faith. Of course, our greatest, most natural fear is death. Had the Lord not taken on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, we would still be "slaves to our fears," driven by our egos and hell bent on our own survival at all costs.

Our first lesson from Hebrews today is that Jesus has freed us from the slavery of fear and death, and in that freedom we have unity and life. Of course, the unity we share and the life we enjoy is not of our own making. We love and affirm one another because God first loved and affirmed us. And he did this through Jesus Christ. Hebrews says that Jesus became like us, "like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God...."

The high priest at the time was as close to God as you could get. In Jesus, God laid aside his divinity and becomes fully human, drawing nearer to us than we could ever hope or imagine.

It's like when a mom or dad kneels down to an injured child in order to be on his level, to get as close as they can, and make all the pain and suffering go away. You can't do that from some lofty place. God comes to us in the fullness of humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. And God goes one step further. God not only kneels down along side us, but God actually takes on our pain and suffering, transforming it into healing and joy.

By taking our pain and suffering, our struggles and fears all the way to the grave and beyond, God in Jesus Christ gives us access to healing, wholeness and new life. Through Christ, we embody the Spirit of God as God's faithful children.

Now, at the core of God's being is love and unity – the love and unity shared by God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. When we are at our best, we tap into that Spirit of love and unity and overcome the fear and scarcity that puts us at odds with one another.

At our worst, we fail at this, letting struggle and infighting take over, in our relationships, and across the globe. How do we overcome that? Left to our own devices, we can't. History has shown that in and off ourselves, we struggle and fight. The world is difficult and we are not always up to the challenge.

And herein lies the greatest gift that God has given to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus did not merely live alongside us in flesh and blood, do some healings, offer some insights, and work some miracles. Jesus suffered as we do. Hebrews tells us that "because (Jesus) himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Jesus helps us in our struggle by giving us the miracle of our faith and uniting us in the Spirit of God.

If you would like to draw closer to the Spirit of God living and moving among us, I encourage you to begin our Summer Reading program, which starts this Saturday. Each day from June through August, we will read a short passage from one of the letters of Paul, compiled by Bonnie Ratcliff. Each week, you can get a list of questions to reflect on while reading those passages. For instance, in Romans, we will deepen our sense of Jesus Christ as Savior of all. Through Galatians and Ephesians, we will draw closer to our fellow human beings, in the unity of Christ. Our reading from Philippians will encourage us in the good works we do, lifting us up in service to God.

Colossians will show us how Christ leads to a deeper relationship with God, Thessalonians will point us to our faith in Christ's return, while in the Letters to Titus and Philemon we can actually feel Paul putting his arm around our shoulders as a friend and fellow worker for the gospel.

In all of this, we draw closer to God through Jesus Christ, and in doing that we share in the unity of the Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is with us. The Spirit of Jesus Christ lives in each of us. And in the unity of that Spirit, you will always find comfort, encouragement, and blessings to overcome any fear and meet all of your needs. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, what a joy it is that we can live as people of hope. On Memorial Day like no other we are grateful for the peace of knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that our place is with you when our time on this Earth is through.

We long to be with you, surrounded by your beauty. Help us to live with this vision always uplifting our hearts, even as we thank you for the taste of heaven we have here. It is a gift beyond measure that stirs in us a longing for more.

We thank you, too, for the gift of loved ones who are now with you in the fullness of your glory, especially Myla Gentry who entered into your presence this past Wednesday.

We are particularly thankful this weekend for the sacrifice made by men and women of the armed services.

And for us, Lord, as we await the fullness of your glory, we are thankful for the opportunity to minister to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. As an act of this ministry, we pray now for those in need of healing, and especially for all those we prayerfully keep in our hearts.

Hear these and all our prayers, Heavenly Father – prayers spoken and unspoken – and bring your beauty, your truth, your Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name, as he taught us, saying:

**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.**