

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
955 Main St.
Barboursville, West Virginia 25504
August 30, 2020

Prelude

Announcements

Call to Worship 2 Corinthians 5:19

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to God's self,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Hymn Spirit, Open My Heart

Music: Irish Melody, Text: Ruth Duck, 1994

Spirit, open my heart
to the joy and pain of living.
As you love, may I love,
in receiving and in giving.
Spirit, open my heart.

God, replace my stony heart
with a heart that's kind and tender,
all my coldness and fear,
to your grace I now surrender. Refrain.

Write your love upon my heart
as my law, my goal, my story.
In each thought, word, and deed,
may my living bring you glory. Refrain.

May I weep with those who weep,
share the joy of sister, brother.
In the welcome of Christ,
may we welcome one another. Refrain.

Gathering Prayer

O God, you invite the poor and sinful to take their place
in the festive assembly of the new covenant.
May your Church always honor the presence of the Lord
in the humble and suffering,

and may we learn to recognize each other as brothers and sisters, children of one heavenly Father. Amen.

Old Testament Reading Exodus 3:1-15

New Testament Reading Romans 12:9-21

The Morning Message

This morning we have two beautiful scripture texts. The Exodus text is what we Christian educators like to call a “bookmark story.” This is a biblical passage that you mark as important. You will return to it many times in your walk of faith. It is one of the passages we want our children to learn at an early age so that they may experience something of the awe and mystery of a God who speaks from a burning bush.

The Romans text is a letter from Paul to the Christians in Rome. These believers were finding themselves on the outs with their friends and family members who had not converted to Christianity. They could not or would not understand or respect that these new Christians had made a commitment to a different way of life. They had abandoned some non-Christian practices, such as worshiping idols. This set them apart from their peers and their peers disparaged them. Paul wrote to encourage them.

Pastor and Professor Amy Allen, says, “Christians are not called to ignore despair, but to help sow joy in its wake; not to condone hate, but to be all the more zealous in their own loving in its face. The politics of overcoming evil are about neither ignoring nor condoning evil, but rather, fighting it with the strongest possible power-love.”

In the wake of recent troubles across our nation- the pandemic, the Presidential race, and now, Hurricane Laura, Paul’s words seem particularly important. Amy Allen says “In the midst of the human temptation toward disparagement or retribution, this discourse on love provides a timely call to what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians as ‘a still more excellent way.’”

The topics of conversation in our house lately seem to always work themselves around to what we have accomplished that day while observing all the safety measures necessary during the pandemic. Now that Ed has returned to school, we have less control over our environment, and our risk of infection has increased. Once students start arriving, the risk will escalate.

But, Ed is a teacher, and somehow, he has to create a learning environment and teach music. Students and parents are expecting this, and he, and all teachers, are committed to this purpose.

It is a heavy lift and the unknowns will likely make it heavier.

Would Paul have a word for us in this moment?

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

If I were a teacher, or other school system employee, I might just write this on a slip of paper and carry it in my pocket every day.

Hurricane Laura caused havoc across the south. Storm surges, ferocious winds, falling trees, destruction of homes, injuries, death. I saw on the news a man standing in front of his brother's home. The house had sustained a tree crashing through its roof and badly injuring the man's sister in law. In the driving rain, an army of neighbors had shown up to clean up the mess. The man expressed his love and appreciation for these acts of charity from his neighbors and friends. “It's what we do for one another.” Simple as that.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning penned these words:

“Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; and only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.”

And when neighbors show up to bear one another's burdens, to haul limbs off roof and gutters, and patch holes so it is habitable, they are standing in God's presence on holy ground.

Where else might we encounter holy ground?

I've witnessed moments that I would call holy. The birth of a baby. The death of a saint. The reconciliation of warring parties.

We have witnessed too many events this summer that were anything but holy: the death of George Floyd and others victims of oppression; violence and destruction born of hate; fear in the streets of our country; people lining up on opposing political sides, hurling insults, accusations, falsehoods, blame back and forth.

When I was in elementary school, we sometimes played war ball in gym class. It's evil. I mean that. Because I was always a target. Shorter than the others and not nearly as fast, I was always hit first and hit hard. As I headed for the bleachers, where you went you got “killed,” I would struggle to hold back tears, even if my face were bruised and my nose bleeding. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. I'd often spend the rest of the day thinking up terrible things I could do for revenge.

I've wanted to react with that same sense of revenge recently in response to what I would call injustice. A response is demanded of us. But what? What will it take to restore peace in the streets?

Some may buy weapons. Some may install razor wire around their property. Some may march in protest. Or take a knee.

What we must not do is assassinate that which is holy in every human heart. Friends, we were, each one of us, made in the very image of God. When we attack, hurt, or destroy another human being- we fail to recognize the image of God in the other and as a result, we become separated from God.

When we hurt, or see our loved ones, or even a stranger, hurt, our fallen human nature wants someone to pay. And if laws are broken, penalties must be paid. We don't want to live in a lawless society.

But there is law that goes deeper. The law of love.

Paul says, "If it is possible, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Amy Allen says, we have to find that more excellent way, Paul speaks of.

The politics of overcoming evil are neither about ignoring nor condoning evil, but, rather, fighting it with the strongest power possible- the power of love.

"Earth's crammed with heaven. And every common bush afire with God, and only he, or she, who sees, takes off his or her shoes..."

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Lord God, of goodness and grace, we come before you at the beginning of a new week, a week of possibilities and promise, a week of hard work and compromise. Give us strength to meet this week's challenges. Lead us to honor the holy image in which you have made all your children. Help us in our weakness and forgive our failures as we try to faithfully serve you in spirit and truth.

Hear now our prayers for the world...

For our country and its leaders...

For victims of the hurricane and other disasters...

For those who re-construct and restore to order...

For those in places torn by racism, violence, and those things your Word calls sin...
For those who work to bring peace...
For ourselves, that we may be faithful to you and your ways...
For those who give of themselves, bearing up burdens...
For those in need, for those who are ill, for the anxious, the grieving, for all caregivers...
Praying in Jesus' name, 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.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory forever. Amen.

Blessing

In everything, let us offer our thanks to God.
In our darkness and questioning,
in our relief and rejoicing,
in the assurance that God holds us in love,
that we may cheerfully serve others
replacing fear with the hope born of Eternal Love. Amen.

Postlude