Sunday, January 19, 2020

10:00 AM Worship

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenwood, SC

“The Promise of Faithfulness”

Psalm 40:1-11

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Recently, Kathy Gillespie shared a memory with me. A memory of a year spent with kindergarteners, teaching them about worship, preparing them for the time when they would sit among the congregation for a whole hour, sharing in the worship of God. Undoubtably, they taught the children about prayers of praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession. They certainly they told them how the preacher would read God’s word from the Bible and the people would sing songs from the hymnal. I imagine they splashed in the waters of baptism and tasted bread and juice with great solemnity after hearing the story of Jesus’ last supper. I bet they told them about the colors of the seasons in church – how there were white cloths for Easter and green cloths for most days and purple cloths for waiting times like Advent and Lent, and red cloths only ever so rarely – for Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the church so that the gospel might spread from them like wild fire. And on days when people were being ordained, days like today, when courageous people answer God’s call to be servant leaders, when we reach beyond John’s baptism of water towards the promise of Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. For it is this promise, this Holy Spirit present with us, this Holy Spirit inspiring us, this Holy Spirit helping us, that gives us the courage to say yes, to being the leaders, to being the people, God calls us to be.

But, I wonder, did they teach the children what to do when the words in the sermon were hard to understand or when the preacher had gone on too long and their feet began to wiggle, and their bodies began to squirm? Did they equip them with coloring sheets and blank pages for doodling? Did they give them worship buddies to sit with them and help them concentrate? Did they show them how to make their own treasure hunt, looking for crosses in the room, or the number of times they could find God’s name in the bulletin? If they did, those children would certainly have noticed, as perhaps you did, that in the name of Jesus is written 8 times in the first nine verses of Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth.

It delighted me, to learn at seminary, that this pattern seeking I had done as a child in church, was actually a legitimate tool for Bible study. What are the words that show up most? What are the first words and the last words? If you take a look at these nine verses from Paul, you will get a good primer on letter writing etiquette in first century Palestine, lined out like an elementary teacher might line out a formal letter format for his students:

First, you tell who the letter is from. Then, who it is to. Exchange the grace and peace of Christ. Share words of thanksgiving and encouragement. Then get down to the meat of the matter about which you are writing, and for Paul and the church at Corinth, if you are to read into the very next verse, is a question of leadership. You see, the church is divided about who their leaders are. Which is why, I believe, Paul has so firmly established, eight times over, who it is that unites them. Who, it is that calls them. Who, it is who sends them. Who it is who sanctifies them and unites them, not only with one another, but with all those who call on his name. Who it is who equips them and strengthens them. Who it is who leads them. You can say it with me, “our Lord, Jesus Christ.”

When there is disagreement, where do we look? To Jesus. When we are weary, where do we look? To Jesus. When we are weak, where do we look? To Jesus. When there are no words, where do we look? To Jesus.

We started our leadership retreat last week with these words from Paul. Faced with the many tasks before us, we began by looking at what God does in Jesus Christ. As we spoke of God’s faithfulness, God’s strength, God’s sanctifying, God’s sending, God’s equipping, we strung this weaving with a sturdy thread, a foundation for the church. And then we spent the next hour, drawing names of Westminster’s members, visitors and friends, speaking them out loud and praying for them each one by name. When names were read, I saw the faces around the circle light up with thanksgiving, and soften with concern. After five or six names were read and prayed for, the Elder would weave a cloth into that strong foundation, until the cloths filled the weaving up to the top and had to be combed down to make room for more, until the church came to life in our prayers, our joys and sufferings, talents and needs, woven into one.

*“God is faithful,” Paul writes. “He has called you into fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

This is what that looks like (weaving). This is what that looks like (church). When all that we do, and the great diversity of who we are, is woven into the promised faithfulness of God.

Standing on the promise of God’s faithfulness, we make promises to God and to one another and to the work that has been set before us. Our new elders will make promises. And we will make promises. If you look, these promises we make begin and end with Jesus Christ, who is the sign of God’s faithfulness and the model for ours. Hear that again. The beginning and the ending of our promises to one another is Jesus Christ, the sign of God’s faithfulness and the model for ours.

The first question to the elders:

Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? **I do.**

The last question to us:

Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church? **We do.**

Today in Psalm 40, we read,

Happy are those who make
          the LORD their trust,
     who do not turn to the proud,
          to those who go astray after false gods.
5   You have multiplied, O LORD my God,
          your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;
          none can compare with you.
     Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
          they would be more than can be counted.

*And later on…*

6   Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
          but you have given me an open ear.
     Burnt offering and sin offering
          you have not required.
7   Then I said, “Here I am;
          in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
8   I delight to do your will, O my God;
          your law is within my heart.”

May our worship and our work be an open ear to our faithful God, whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ. May we trust in him to guide us as we seek to be faithful to our promises, so that when the children look at us, as we have looked at the opening words to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, they will see the thread of his life in every verse of our common life, woven together on the sturdy threads of God’s faithfulness.