

**Sunday, August 23, 2015, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Call to Worship (please see bulletin)**

**Prayer of the Day**

God of our fathers and mothers,  
Who sees the struggles of your people,  
and comes to save,  
Give us eyes to see you,  
feet to feel the holy ground beneath us,  
and hearts willing to follow you,  
So that all your people may know your salvation.  
Amen.

**Call to Confession**

God knows our hearts and understands our needs. And yet it still helps us to approach Him with the confidence of children, as we stand before the throne of grace confessing our shortcomings. Please pray with me in faith and in penitence.

**Prayer of Confession (please see bulletin)**

**Assurance of Grace**

True abundance does not come because of what we do  
but because of the Person we know.  
God invites us into a bounty of forgiveness, inviting you to share the same with others.

Friends, believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ!

**In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.**

**Psalm 84:1-10 (see bulletin)**

**Prayers of the People**

Oh God, we come to prayer this day  
with no words...  
hearts heavy, minds reeling,  
fear and grief and anger and hopelessness and resistance  
all mingling together  
and blocking the things we want and need to say.

And yet you are still God.  
We cannot comprehend why these things happen...  
Ask us why.  
We cannot seem to believe you  
when you say we are one body, neighbors with near and far...  
Ask us why.  
And keep asking, in the silence of our hearts and the conversations of our lives,  
until we see you face to face—  
in every face.

We lift up to you those who grieve this day—  
whose family and friends have been ripped from them  
by violence,  
by illness,  
by cultural complacency.  
We pray especially for the families of Mother Emanuel church,  
and for their two remaining pastors.  
May your spirit of comfort surround them,  
even as your spirit of righteousness burns in their broken hearts.  
May they know your powerful presence,  
and be strengthened as their ancestors in that place were strengthened  
to stand up for what is right,  
to stand together with all who enter,  
to stand firm in your promise that one day all tears will be wiped away,  
and in that day we will see the truth that we belong to each other.

We pray also this day for ourselves.  
May our eyes be opened to recognize you—even in people who look nothing like us.  
May our hearts be opened to love as you love—without reservation or requirement.  
May our minds be opened to the reality of this world and our place in it—without defensiveness.  
And when you have broken us open,  
pour in your Spirit of justice and truth, of transformation and peace.  
Where we insist on putting the pieces back together,  
provoke our imaginations to new possibilities,  
and frustrate our self-preserving goals.  
Melt us and mold us, however uncomfortable or painful it may be,  
then fill us and use us to be agents of transformation in this world.

We pray reluctantly, and boldly, and fearfully, and hopefully—  
my kingdoms go, Lord.  
Our kingdoms of entitlement, our kingdoms of self-sufficiency, our kingdoms of privilege, our  
kingdoms of individualism, our kingdoms of helplessness, our kingdoms of self-righteousness,  
whatever kingdoms we have sworn allegiance to, or built for ourselves, or used to hide in...  
our kingdoms go,  
and may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.  
Come Quickly, Lord.

We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, the One who sat down at the margins, worked to  
overthrow the empire, and taught us to pray together, Our father...

### **TIME OUT FOR TEACHING: Our Connections to the Saints - Worship**

Chapter LXVII.—Weekly worship of the Christians. And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion

is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

### **Prayer for Illumination**

As we read the words of scripture,  
point us to your living Word who walked among us;  
as we are surrounded by your Spirit, whispering words within our hearts and minds.  
Inspire us in our hearing and reflecting,  
that we may move beyond your words  
into life-changing acts of grace, love, hope, and peace.  
Amen.

### **1 KINGS 8: 22-30, 41-43**

<sup>22</sup>Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. <sup>23</sup>He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, <sup>24</sup>the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. <sup>25</sup>Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' <sup>26</sup>Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

<sup>27</sup>"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! <sup>28</sup>Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; <sup>29</sup>that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this

place. <sup>30</sup>Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive."

<sup>41</sup>"Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name <sup>42</sup> — for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm — when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, <sup>43</sup>then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built."

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### **John 6:56-69**

<sup>56</sup>"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate,

and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." <sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"<sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. <sup>65</sup>And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

<sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

## **Sermon: Ambassadors in Chains**

Just last week, I was asked the question, “If a first-century Christian traveled to our time, would he recognize us as Christian?” That’s a very good question. There are many things that make us look and sound different from those first Christians. But as you heard from the reading I shared with you earlier, our Sunday worship has a lot in common with what they did 2000 years ago.

But there is something that maybe we forget we have in common with those early Christians. It’s that we all face a world, when you get right down to it, which is still somewhat hostile towards the church.

Those early Christians were trying to discern how to respond to the hostility they faced. They expected Jesus’ return any day now. And as they waited, they felt the powers of the Empire breathing down their necks, the persecution of their neighbors and a society which pressured them to recant their faith. They met to worship the Lord in secret, meeting in the underground cemeteries – called “catacombs” – where, amongst the dead, they worshiped the resurrected Lord. They heard the stories of other Christians, like Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had been burned at the stake. Still others, like Justin the Martyr, beheaded along with his students, because they refused to recant their faith.

That was the “new normal” of what it meant to be a Christian. They believed that they had died to their past, through baptism, and risen to new life as they emerge from those baptismal waters. And yet, living that new life in Christ was not completely complete until Jesus returned to judge and heal the world. They were striving to live that new life in between the now and the not yet. They believed that they didn’t have very much time to make the very most of this new life. They were aware of the danger because of their new life in Jesus.

If we were to examine the world, it wouldn't take long to discover the dangers of being Christian. The bombs set off outside of the Calvary Baptist church and Holy Cross Catholic Church in Las Cruces just three weeks ago remind us that hostility does exist towards the Christians. Between 200 and 300 people were inside the Catholic church at the time. Just as Monsignor John Anderson was saying, "Take and eat, this is my body," there was a pow, and it sounded more than just a gunshot. He just kept on saying the words, carried on with the feeding the body and blood of Jesus to the people of God.

Some have said it's wrong that these recent church bombings have gotten far more coverage than the numerous other crimes that happen in Las Cruces every day. However, whenever a house of God is assaulted it reminds us of the persecution that happened to the first apostles. We feel anger at those who set off the bombs, shocked that someone could do that to a church.

The first martyrs probably weren't so surprised as we.

I don't know what they thought of the hatred directed at them. I'm sure it was frightening. But the hatred directed at them was a legal and socially acceptable at that time. They didn't have the ATF or the FBI looking into their interests. Based on the cruel world into which the Christian faith was born, having seen the persecution that the Romans were already doing to Jews, those first Christians were probably less surprised than we are at the persecution. This new life in Christ meant a whole new standard of living. They were, as Ephesians says, "ambassadors in chains." Prepared to receive torment for their faith, for it gave a chance give a witness to their faith.

Let me just say one thing about martyrdom. It is not about going out and asking to be a sacrificial lamb. It is not about looking for trouble. It is about living the life to which God calls

us, and, if it just so happens to grab someone's attention, so be it. Notice that in Ephesians the only weapon he tells us to carry is the Word of God, all the other gear is protective gear.

Martyrdom isn't always about being killed either. The ancients knew the word "martyr" in a different sense. Marturion means "witness." You are a giving testimony about God whenever you are carrying on with faith, even if you get ridiculed.

We can be thankful for those moments when we get noticed for doing the right thing. It's a chance to be ambassadors, even if in chains. Find that peace of Christ within you when you get noticed. Don't be shocked at hostility. You may speak out against it but do it calmly with peace at the center of your heart, and at that time, you will be doing the right thing. I offer these words in the name of the one who gives us peace which passes all understanding, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Announcements**

Next Sunday we continue our "What's a Presbyterian?" Summer Adult Education series on Sundays at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. It's not too late to join in the conversation.

Ever had a question about God? The Bible? Or something theological? Your question might become the next sermon topic. Please write your questions down and drop them in the jar in the Narthex.