

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
April 26, 2020; 3rd Sunday of Easter, Year A

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING 1 Peter 1:17-25

¹⁷ If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For

"All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers, and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever." [Isaiah 40:6-8]

2ND SCRIPTURE READING Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "**What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?**" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹ He asked them, "**What things?**" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "**Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!** ²⁶ **Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?**" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

SERMON

Fresh Bread

Rev. Martin McGeachy

When Mary sent me her video Prelude for today, I was immediately struck by the title, named from Psalm 23, "Surely Goodness and Mercy." Even if you can't remember the whole psalm by memory, I know you can recite the phrase with me, all together now, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." I never thought about this before, but in this psalm about the Lord's leading, goodness and mercy shall follow me. I don't follow them. If I get going, following where Christ leads, surely goodness and mercy shall follow; and then, only then, will I dwell in the house of the Lord. Because the Lord is housed in walking in love, the road to Emmaus, the breaking of bread.

I'm thinking today about the breaking of bread, but there's no Holy Communion service, virtual or otherwise, and that's actually perfect for contemplation on those early disciples, whose lord and leader had been killed, and had to come to a new understanding of what being a disciple meant—what He meant. And so Jesus came to them on the road, these followers completely blind to what he looked like now, and he taught them all over again, opened their minds and hearts to new understanding, new feeling, new acting. Here we are, you and I, unable to meet as we Normally do, unable to experience either Holy Communion, or even commune with one another. Not as we've known it. We're on the road to Emmaus, and it's time to let Jesus come and open our hearts to a new reality. It's time to dig deep and figure out who we are at heart, our hearts of faith burning within us.

What does it mean for our hearts to be burning within us? Burning with excitement, fear, dread, hope, optimism, pessimism, boredom, over-stimulation, all of the above all at the same time? His peace is the answer. But it isn't revealed in merely getting together to worship. I often think about Ed Allmond, who was in a nursing home the last weeks of his life, and how a number of his nurses came to his funeral to offer thanks for his attitude and humor. Imagine if you were suddenly confined to a nursing home, couldn't get out, your normal life curtailed. No ability to go out and save the world with your brilliance, no ability to be with friends, laughing and joking, sharing the love of life, the abundance of Christ. Imagine. You're stuck inside a room watching TV (sound familiar?). How would you break bread? Somehow Ed figured out how to get over his own aging and ill health, and bring joy to those around him.

We're hearing a lot about what the new normal will look like when the pandemic is over. Some are desperate to get back to the old normal, and some are afraid there will never be a Normal life again. But friends, there never was. Our lives are never NORMAL. That implies a lack of change, which is a lack of growth. Yes, right now the changes are coming at the speed of a freight train—have you ever played tennis by yourself, with a ball machine gently lobbing balls at you so that you can practice your easy strokes? But turn it up too fast, and there's no way to get those serves! You are pelted with fuzzy yellow missiles, and all you can do is try to protect yourself. Anybody else feeling the life changes like that right now? But even under "Normal" circumstances there is no Normal. "We've always done it that way" must always be followed with, "Yeah, how's that working for you?" Even if the answer is "astoundingly great," the next question for a person of faith (and sometimes this question can come first) is, "How's that working for my neighbor?" If I have healthcare, plenty of money, food, clothing and jewelry, maybe my Normal is pretty cool. But if my next door neighbor is lying in the street in hunger and poverty, their Normal is not acceptable, and as Martin Luther King said, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality." (— Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation)

In Luke 16:19, Jesus tells the parable of the rich man who had comfort and luxury, but ignored the man lying at the foot of his door, and the moral of that story is that it is the rich man who is in real poverty, and it does not end well for him. As Christians, who in our faith include a Confession of Sin at least once a week, if not daily or hourly, we're called always to be examining our current status quo, and checking in with God as to whether it's Good/God, not merely for us, but our neighbor. Breaking bread doesn't mean eating a big old sandwich while watching Netflix. Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples. Communion bread isn't meant to be broken for us to be filled while our neighbor goes hungry. As he gave of himself to them, and we have received of his grace, the breaking continues when we break ourselves in his name and distribute our bread.

The bread of Christ can't be stockpiled, any more than a loaf of Wonder Bread. If it's not given out, a slice of bread becomes stale and moldy. The Communion cup is filled with good wine, his blood poured out in sacrifice. A full cup never emptied stagnates and goes bad. But if we share of our Communion, it is always replenished from above. Fresh bread.

Well, that's good news for the Gilead Food Pantry. Because of the pandemic, the number of food insecure coming to us has more than doubled. After last week, we're out of supplies, out of money. More will come in, because we're scrambling to replenish, and you have been generous with your gifts. In this time of crisis, the New Normal for our ministry is a beefed up focus on handing out food, and I have faith that we'll rise to this challenge. People need bread. Sometimes they need the bread of the Word, and sometimes they need that Wonder Bread. We're here. Breaking bread to make Christ known.

Poet Sonya Renee Taylor wrote online recently,
I feel like the bearer of news that sounds awful but actually is not. We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. we should not long to return my friends. we are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.

I resonate with that, and its soaring poetry, because I'm an idealist, and one who believes that idealism creates new forms of pragmatism. But the work of getting there is painful. I noticed that one person commented on Taylor's poem, in the Old Normal I had a job; in the new Normal I don't. No one wants our fellows to suffer, and we all hurt when others are thrust into the wilderness, but make no mistake; suffering cannot be avoided. It comes, it comes. So let us use it, use our suffering to create a new world that better reflects the kingdom that Christ will rule.

Another poet, the Apostle Paul, said in Romans 8:
I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. [These are but labor pains.(v.22)] ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for [a new birth,] the revealing of the children of God. (Romans 8:18-19)

In the passage preceding our reading from 1 Peter, he preaches about the time of our exile, saying: ¹³ Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when [in the future] he is revealed. ¹⁴ Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵ Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-16) It's all about making ourselves holy, clean. So wash your hands, cleanse your germs, there in your exile... And look at how the material ways we've been living are now denied us. That's good. We are born anew. A New Normal. Based not on the systems of greed and silver and gold, but spirit. That material nonsense perishes. All we have now is what the Scripture calls "genuine mutual love." What will we do with it?

I had a lovely conversation with my nineteen-year-old daughter Rachel last night. She's grown up in an era where fear and anxiety were Normal, from the existential threat to the planet in climate change, to regular drills and news reports about mass killings in schools. At her college, there was a stabbing among her close friends. Now her campus is closed, and her life, like everyone's, is on hold as we figure out what to do next. So imagine my surprise when she told me last night, "I think we're on the edge of a new Golden Age. I think this pain will only bring us together and create in us new depth and abilities."

I was ordained in 1994, just about the time churches in every denomination began to experience significant decline. So for my entire career, great theologians have been debating what church will look like in the 21st century. I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that the predominant experience of church is NOT going to be a beautiful building with a steeple where people pack in on Sunday mornings to sing and

pray and empty their wallets. And if that Normal of the past became what we worshipped, it's just as well that it's being torn from us, either frighteningly fast in a pandemic, or frighteningly slow in a painful decline in membership. We still don't know what the 21st century Church Normal will look like. Will it be more virtual? Maybe—that seems so Ab-Normal, but on the other hand, we've been offering up virtual prayers for 2000 years, and that's a wonderful Normal. There's no better wifi connection than the prayer connection. I don't know. But we have a chance—to enter a golden age of loving God and serving our neighbors in need, singing new songs of grace, mercy and giving.

The Golden Age is yet to come. But it is coming. Right now, let's feed the hungry, break bread with our neighbor, and intentionally look for the reality of the light of Christ which is dawning. Praise be to Christ, it's a New Normal.

Amen.