

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
April 9, 2020; Maundy Thursday, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT READING

Psalms 116:12-19

- ¹² What shall I return to the LORD for all the LORD's bounty to me?
¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,
¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD
 in the presence of all the LORD's people.
¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD
 is the death of the LORD's faithful ones.
¹⁶ O LORD, I am your servant;
 I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
 You have loosed my bonds.
¹⁷ I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
 and call on the name of the LORD.
¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all the LORD's people,
¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!

GOSPEL READING

John 13:12-17, 31-35

[At the festival of the Passover, Jesus called his disciples together for what we now call the Last Supper. And during the meal he knelt to wash their feet:]

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. [And this follows:]
³¹ When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

SERMON

"The Presence of the Lord"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Last night our Jewish brothers and sisters began their observance of Passover, which our Scriptures says is the very observance that called Jesus and his disciples together for a meal 2000 years ago. Passover marks the remembrance of the deliverance of God's people from slavery. We always remember that we were once in captivity, and the Lord has freed us. We will never be forsaken. In Christianity, the Last Supper, where Judas' betrayal sets the crucifixion in motion, is also the First. The beginning of the freedom from slavery to sin, and indeed, death.

Our Jewish friends will begin their Passover with the question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” No one will be unable to answer that question this year, for our Passover meals and our Last Supper meals are done in sequester, which seems antithetical to the very nature of joining together in remembrance. *To remember* is to RE-member, once again provide members to the family of belief in the Lord’s deliverance. How hard it is this night to feel enslaved by virus, sickness, death, isolation, and fear! How hard it is to be apart from our faith families on this night! Except that we aren’t. Not even a little. This is just, as the question states, Different. We are together differently.

I moved to New York in 2002, and my parents lived in Nashville, TN. We got to see each other occasionally, maybe once a year, but we have busy lives and our travel budgets are tight. For a dozen of more years, I felt so far away from them. And then, within the span a few years, they both died, and a strange thing happened. After I went through the initial grief process, I realized that they had stopped feeling far away. Of course, I would dearly love to have them in the same room with me, but at the same time, I feel very closely connected to them, in spirit. In a way, our separation seems less now than it did before. Speaking of family, in my office at the manse are portraits of the six generations of Presbyterian ministers in my family, and when I’m at my desk and they’re looking down on me, they bring me comfort. I never met most of them, but I feel their connection, through communion with Christ.

A few minutes ago, I played “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying” from the “Sounds of Gilead” CD. I’m well aware that the song prays for the LORD to bless our prayers in THIS PLACE. Furthermore, I could pick out a number of beautiful voices in that choir who have gone on to heaven, or gone on to Florida—not here. And we miss them like crazy. But when they sing to me, we are connecting on a level that can’t be explained with logic, or as Romans 8 says, when we’re aching for that love we miss, the Holy “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26) On some deep level, they are still with us. In this place where I stand this evening, yes. But “this place” extends far, far beyond these walls. Beyond the walls where you sit, and beyond any wall we can build to keep the world out. When the Lord’s children gather to pray, the place where the Lord is listening and speaking extends all the way to heaven and back. Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Ps. 139:7-8

There are memorials and plaques around the church which make me feel connected to those angels of Gilead who served here so many years ago. Right above my head each week, the names of some former pastors are engraved on the stained glass that colors our chancel. I don’t know who Daniel Dubois Sahler was, other than the pastor here in 1882, and I’m not sure how to pronounce his name, but I feel connected to him, and all the saints who from their labors rest. Together, we are Gilead. You who are watching this service right now are connected to me, to one another, and to the sacrifice of Jesus, no less that if we were in the same room. Some of you who watch this sometime later may take saltines and Diet Pepsi from your

cupboard and partake of Communion while I'm off somewhere taking a nap—but right now, I'm talking to you—we are together. How? It's a Mystery, but you know it's true. Our energies coalesce despite time and distance. That's the very definition of prayer. And it's the promise of the Mystery of the presence of Christ in Communion.

If you live in Arkansas, or China, or Timbuktu, and you participate in Gilead Presbyterian Church through spirit, prayer, or sacrificial love in action, you are one in the Spirit with Pastor Daniel from 1882, and you and I are one with those whose names we can't foretell, those who will one day sit in this church building, or another like it, and look at the history of the saints of Gilead, digitized on their eyeball cameras, perhaps, and say, "Hey look, back in during the Great Covid Pandemic of 2020, the pastor was Martin McCraacken, or something; I can't pronounce it. I wonder what it was like for Gilead back then." Christ will be with them in the future, and the Holy Spirit draws us all together in its tether of love, grace, and giving.

Indeed, the presence of Christ is even greater in this moment of Holy Communion, this moment of Holy Spirit, than when Jesus the living man said to his friends, "Do this in remembrance of me." For in that historic moment which changed the universe, the disciples did not understand. They were connected by flesh, and our communion, they with him and with us, is through Spirit. "For that which is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." 2 Corinthians 4:18

Did you feel a tinge of regret when I read the verses from Psalm 116?

¹² What shall I return to the LORD
for all the LORD's bounty to me?

¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all the LORD's people.

¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

It speaks of calling on the LORD and making our vows in the LORD's house, in the presence of the LORD's people. And yet tonight for Communion, you are there, and I am here. I am alone in the physical house of the Lord.

What does it mean to lift up the cup of salvation? It doesn't mean merely to drink it oneself; indeed we do so, for all are welcome at Table. Whether it's every month, or every week, or every so often, we all come to the Table to take part in the sacrifice of Christ, and in doing so we commit ourselves to him, and all that he is, and we pray to take him into ourselves, drinking of his brokenness, his sacrifice, drinking of his grace and love. There's a story I heard once. One of his contemporaries noticed that in the great painter Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" that everyone is on only one side of the table. The other side is empty. "Why is that?" they supposedly asked the great artist. His answer was, "So that there may be plenty of room for us to join them."

(http://www.stmaryastoria.com/Holy_Thursday_Reflection_2014.pdf)

What does it mean to pay our vows to the Lord in the presence of the Lord's people? It doesn't mean merely to make promises in church, in view of the assembled faithful. Indeed we do so; we make our promises at Confirmation. We make our promises on behalf of our children at Baptism. We make our promises in marriage, ordination, installation, dedications, and in fact, every week, when we confess and repeat one of the creeds. We do this in the presence of the Lord's people, and yes, it is powerful for us to do so. It helps to keep us in faith, in balance. It gives us hope and strength, and seeing others make these promises strengthens our own, and renews our commitment.

But this lifting up of the cup, this taking of public vows, this is only the beginning of faith, no matter how often we do it. To truly lift up the cup of salvation hearkens to offering the cup to another. To truly pay our vows in the presence of the Lord's people is to offer sacrifice and grace to those people—and who are the Lord's people? At this time we are viscerally aware of how we are connected to all people throughout the world.

Join with me in this moment as we lift up the cup together, and let us break bread together, no matter where we are, offering our love to the Lord's people.

Sing with me, **“Let Us Break Bread Together.”**

- 1. Let us break bread together on our knees (on our knees).
Let us break bread together on our knees (on our knees).
When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.**
- 2. Let us drink wine together on our knees (on our knees).
Let us drink wine together on our knees (on our knees).
When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.**

Amen.