

Last Sunday was Easter Sunday. Easter is a time when worship focuses on the Resurrection of Jesus and lots of folks make their way to church services to hear that message reaffirmed for them. In the midst of the world around us, we heard the message that Jesus was crucified and on the third day he rose again. Good news prevails. And lots of people who don't show up at any other time during the year find themselves in a worship service on Easter Sunday.

But like any great party, there is the day after. The Sunday after Easter is usually, well, to put it bluntly, the great hangover. We could call this hangover Sunday. Last week a lot of energy was put into worship. A lot of emotion. We did some supper amazing things in worship over Holy Week and Easter Sunday. And after all of the excitement and effort, then you get tired. And the people who find themselves in church on the Sunday after Easter are, well, the real dedicated saints. And so it is, I think, very appropriate that we spend this Sunday on an internal matter here at Allison Creek.

This morning after worship the youth and adults are being invited into a conversation. It is a conversation about an internal matter impacting the Presbyterian Church USA, our denomination. And I emphasize that this is an internal matter. Because we are being invited into a conversation today that the people driving by are not going to be talking about. The people passing the church to head to the lake are probably not talking about what standards should be applied to elders and pastors in the Presbyterian Church. The people in the neighborhoods around the church who are just waking up are not consumed by the topic that we will be talking about.

The topic which we will be talking about is an amendment which is being proposed to the constitution of the Presbyterian Church. As was explained in a letter which was sent out last week by the Session, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church consists of two parts. There is the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The Book of Order contains many things. But one of the topics is the standards which guide our selection of elders and pastors.

To add or delete anything from this book, there is a well organized process. Let's say that you want something added or deleted to the Book of Order. In our system in the Presbyterian Church, you can begin that process. So let's say that you have prayed about it and decided that in our Book of Order should be added the requirement that every church must have worship at 11 am on Sunday morning. You would contact your Session. The Session would talk about your proposal. If the Session thought that every church should be required to have worship at 11 am, then session would vote to approve this change and send it to our presbytery.

Our presbytery would then talk about your proposed change to require every church to worship at 11 am on Sunday morning. The presbytery consists of elders from all the churches in our presbytery and the pastors within that presbytery. They would debate this proposal. I would be present along with an elder from this church who would present the proposal to the entire body. The presbytery would debate it. Some would say they think this is a great idea. Others would say they think each church should make the decision.

Let's say that Providence Presbytery votes in favor. It then goes to the General Assembly. The General Assembly meets every two years. The General Assembly is made up of elders like our session and pastors from around the US. The General Assembly would vote on your proposal to require every congregation to conduct worship at 11 am.

If this group of elders and pastors agreed with this proposal, then it would go to each of the 173 presbyteries to vote on this proposed change. Each of those presbyteries would debate whether or not each church should be required to conduct worship at 11 am on Sunday morning or whether each church should make that decision themselves. If a majority of these presbyteries agree with the change, then this change is added to our constitution.

In the letter which you received, and there are copies out in the church entrance, you know that an amendment has been proposed by a Session to their presbytery and then to the General Assembly and is now being debated by all of the presbyteries. The vote has been close. But in the next couple of weeks, a majority of the presbyteries will have voted in favor of this change and this change will be added to the Book of Order. Some will celebrate and some will have concerns and some will yawn.

In our conversation here after worship we will allow folks to express their opinions. But you will also have emphasized that this church will continue to apply the standards which we believe are biblical in the leaders we select and no other governing body will tell us whom we have to call as elders and pastors. That decision will continue to rest with this church and we will continue to decide our standards which will be based, we believe, on Scripture and guided by the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions.

With that in mind, let us turn to the Scripture from the gospel of John.

Read John 20:19-31

The disciples are scared. The doors are locked because they fear that since Jesus was killed that they, as his followers, would be next. Mary Magdalene had told them that Jesus was risen but, well, you know, she is a woman and the opinion of a woman was not all that valued by the men in the society.

But then Jesus comes into the midst of the group of scared disciples and says to them, "Peace be with you." He shows them his hands and his side and again he says to them, "Peace be with you." And then he shares with them the Holy Spirit and calls upon them to forgive one another.

There is one of the remaining 11 disciples who is not present with the rest of the disciples that evening. It is Thomas. The other disciples tell Thomas about what has happened and Thomas says, "I need to see it for myself. I will not believe unless I can put my finger in his side."

One week later, the disciples are again in the house. This time Thomas is with them. Who knows what they are talking about? Maybe trying to figure out what they are supposed to do next. And once again Jesus appears to them. And once again Jesus says to them, "Peace be with you." And this time, Thomas is invited to put his hands in Jesus' side and Thomas proclaims that Jesus is his Lord and his God.

For whatever reason, you may join with Thomas and have doubts about the future. You may have doubts that the church can truly reach out in a way that is faithful to the gospel. You may have doubts that the church can truly be a place where "all are welcome." You may have doubts that the church can express the standards which you believe are important standards to uphold in its leaders. You may have serious doubts about a lot of things in your life. Just like Thomas had doubts.

But after the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus met with this diverse group of disciples and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. There were those that were scared and those that were doubters. There were those that felt pretty sure about what lay ahead and those that didn't have a clue. But this group of misfits Jesus blesses with the Holy Spirit and he says to them, "Peace."

I wonder what it would look like if in the midst of the discussion this afternoon we all catch a glimpse of the risen Christ who says to each of us,

"Peace be with you. I share my Spirit with you.

Go and serve where you are called. AMEN.

Prayers of the People

On the evening
of the first day of creation,
Holy God,
you held out your hands,
filled with all the grace
we would ever need;
you began to surround us
with all that is good and pleasant.

On the evening
of the first day of Easter,
Defeater of Death,
you walked through
the closed doors
of our doubts and fears;
you held us tight
until the warmth of your grace
softened our hardened hearts;
you handed us the gift of peace
to calm our frightened faith.

On the evening
of the first day of following you,
Breath of Peace,
you open our eyes
to the bright color of hope;
you teach us
the glad songs of grace;
you share the most
valuable gift of all:
faith and peace.

Lead us to be an example to the world of how Christians treat one another.
Surround us with your love for one another and guide us to walk through whatever
discussions we have with one another about important issues. May we uplift and
pray for one another and seek your ways of peace.....

Unison Prayer of Confession

We lock the doors of compassion, God of Easter, so that we may share it only with those we believe to be deserving. We harden our hearts to the cries around us, because we cannot be completely sure of who is in need. We close our eyes to the suffering around us, believing it will all go away if we don't look. Forgive us, God of Hope. You fill us with all the grace we need, not because we are so special, but because we are servants, called to hold out our hands to all in need, even as Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, holds out his hands to us, to lead us into your kingdom.

Assurance of Pardon

From the shadows of life, God brings us into the Light of Christ. From the prison of sin and death, God sets us free to live in hope.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has raised him from the dead, and given us new life. Through his name, we are forgiven.