

Sermon

“Bound Firmly Together”

November 17th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Psalm 122 and Ephesians 4:1-6

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 122

¹ I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” ² Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. ³ Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. ⁴ To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. ⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. ⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. ⁷ Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” ⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” ⁹ For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. [NRSV]

Ephesians 4:1-6

¹ I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Almighty God, as we have read and heard the words of scripture again this morning, we are pointed to your living Word who walked among us; and we are surrounded by your Spirit, who whispers 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; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

The Church Defined

The original Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia* and from that term we get the fancy word “ecclesiology,” which is the study of the church as a biblical and theological topic. In a biblical sense, the *church* is defined simply as the

community of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. And, in the New Testament, it is used both in a limited sense for a local community and in a universal sense for all believers. In a theological sense, the *church* is defined by faith ancestors like John Calvin as a place where the Word of God is preached and where the sacraments are rightly administered. And, from Calvin and other theologians, Presbyterian churches today continue to strongly emphasize these two primary components of our faith—visually in our worship spaces through the prominence of pulpits, Communion tables, and fonts, and also by how our worship services are centered around the reading and proclaiming of God’s Word followed by the sacraments.

The Church as the Body of Christ

Perhaps a slightly less intellectual attempt to define the “church” would be to say that the *church* is a community of faith where people of God are drawn together across all lines of nationality, ethnicity, gender, or economic status by the common work of God’s Spirit. Actually, I gotta tell ya, I like that a lot more because we start to see how the “church” can only be the church when people come *together*, regardless of their differences. And, so then we might also say that the *church* is a collection of believers in Jesus Christ, who are called by God into one body and drawn together by the Holy Spirit to live as God’s people and disciples of Jesus Christ in this world. Now, I really like that definition because it uses one of my favorite words to talk about being the church—*body*—one body.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1st Corinthians 12:27). And, ever since people of faith have come together and served together and loved together, in Christ’s name, as the *church*, to accomplish God’s will and purpose for our world—just like the different parts of our human bodies work together to keep us functioning and alive. We need each other because Christianity is not an enterprise of rugged individualists, and we cannot separate our own salvation from the struggles of our brothers and sisters in faith. One illustration of this idea comes from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo needs the entire group, the fellowship of the ring, to accomplish his task. Or, think of Dorothy in *The*

Wizard of Oz and how she needs the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man to complete her journey. So in a culture that values and promotes the individual person as much as our culture does, it is not easy to find and live in a community that truly is the body of Christ ... but that is exactly who we are as Christ-following people of faith here at First Presbyterian!

Still, we know it doesn't always work out. Communities of faith sometimes don't act like a body. Schisms and divisions do occur. Churches don't always overcome the various challenges they face and so they splinter. It's occurred in a variety of churches in Newton County over the years. It's occurred in our denomination and many others over the years as well. Indeed, it's sad and it's discouraging.

The Church as a Family of Faith

But, recently I was asked what I will miss most about First Presbyterian Church ... and my response was that I will miss *this* community ... because I believe the community of faith here at FPC is indeed a community—an authentic, genuine community. And, it's unique because it truly is as much a *family* of faith as it is a community of faith. I've been a member or served at a variety of churches in my lifetime, and trust me when I say, this church is amazing. I mean ... it's awesome! *You* are awesome!

And, so many different sets of circumstances have reinforced my feelings about this congregation lately—about how we truly are a family of faith. Yes, considering our faith ancestor's definition of church, we have been and will continue to be a place where people gather in worship each week to hear the scriptures read and proclaimed. Yes, we have been and will continue to be a place where people celebrate the sacraments together. But, it's more than those things—it's so much more.

For starters, today we will also elect new elders to serve on the Session, and next week we will gather together for a “thankful breakfast” to celebrate all the things we should be thankful for during this past year. We will lift up the leaders among us and we will celebrate being together as this family of faith because that's what families do for each other—we welcome each other and celebrate with each

other and congratulate one another and lift each other up. Over the past year, multiple church members have been sick or hospitalized or rushed in for life-saving surgeries, or they were approaching their end, and I have watched and listened as we have rallied together time and again to pray for each other and visit each other and make phone calls and send cards, emails, and text messages to each other and much more because that's what families do for each other—we pray and we care and we show genuine concern and we lift each other up. That's just who *you* are!

The Church “Bound Firmly Together”

Today's sermon title comes from the beginning verses of Psalm 122, where the city of Jerusalem is described as the house of the Lord—a place where people are glad to go and visit and be a part of—a place that is “bound firmly together.” I believe that same sentiment is true for this congregation as well. First Presbyterian Church is a place where people are glad to go and visit and be a part of. It's also a place, like the Apostle Paul describes, where we are called to be “one” even if that means not being the “same.” It's a place that understands and accepts that the concepts of unity and oneness in Christ DO NOT mean being the same or always being in agreement ... but it does mean we are called to love each other despite the differences that may divide us. It's a place where sentiments like relationship, humility, togetherness, community, forgiveness, acceptance, and love all exist. This is who *you* are. *You* are the body of Christ. *You* are a family of faith. And, thanks be to God, no matter what the future holds, *you* are “bound firmly together.”

Let us pray ... Loving God, through Jesus Christ we have heard your call to live as the body of Christ, and we praise you for your Spirit, who binds us firmly together. In all our work, fellowship, and leisure, we pray for the grace to live together as a family of faith within a world that all too often feels fractured and divided. We pray for imagination to find ways to strengthen our common unity in Christ. And, we also pray for courage to carry out these commitments in a spirit of joy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And, let all God's people say ... Amen.