

Sermon

“Putting It All Together”

May 19th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

5th Sunday of Easter

Based on Psalm 67 and John 14:15-27

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 67

¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, ² that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. ³ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. ⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. ⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. ⁶ The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. ⁷ May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him. [NRSV]

John 14:15-27

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” ²³ Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. ²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Our Lord and our God, through the hearing and proclaiming of your Word, fill us with your Spirit. Soften our hearts that we may delight in your presence. Sharpen our minds that we may discern your truth. And, shape our wills that we may desire your ways. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord we pray, and let all God's people say ... Amen.

Putting It All Together—in School

As has become our habit around this time every year, during a recent car ride to school I asked my daughter, Nicole, how many more days of school she had left before summer break. At that point, she still had double-digits worth of days to go. Almost laughably, as she's grown older, Nicole acts less and less interested in my annual inquiries, but I know for a fact that she's been counting down the days practically since Spring Break ended back in early April.

In fact, I will always remember how a similar conversation went a few years back when we lived in North Carolina. Nicole and a friend were in the car together and I asked the same kind of question, which they promptly disregarded in favor of maintaining focus and attention on their phones and related conversation. So I started quietly going through the calendar for the rest of the school year in my head. And, I added up the last week of April; and then I added up each of the four-plus weeks of May; and then I accounted for the Memorial Day holiday; and then I finally added in parts of the first two weeks of June. By then a vast amount of time had passed between my initial question to the girls and the mathematical feat in my mind—probably 30 whole seconds or less. But, they had definitely moved on and so I politely interrupted them and proudly said, “Wow, I figured it out. You only have 33 more days of school left.” At that point, they dismissively responded, “Yeah, we know. We've been counting since Christmas, and besides, all the teachers have it written on their whiteboards anyway.” Needless to say, it had been a long time since I'd felt that small. ☺

Of course, since we now enjoy living in Georgia where school ends well before Memorial Day, as of tomorrow (Monday, May 20th), Nicole only has 3 days of school left and most of that time will be spent taking exams. And, so I realize that teachers and students have been busy reviewing the many weeks and months

of school that have come before, hoping to tap into the reservoirs of knowledge that have been filled up since last August. It happens every year about this time, in some form or fashion, in practically every school, from coast to coast—teachers doing their best to help students take all they’ve learned during the entire school year and *put it all together* for one final opportunity to display their brilliance.

But, it can be such a yucky time as well—full of anxiety, fear, and worry. I can certainly remember the pressure of standardized end of year exams when I was growing up. So much tends to depend up them, and I feel sympathy for students of all ages who endure this routine near the end of each and every school year. Actually, it reminds me of a phrase from a devotion I recently read—that worry and anxiety, or fear and uncertainty, can rob us of joy. In this case, my hope and prayer is that all the worry and anxiety about the end of year tests and projects won’t rob Nicole or any of our students of their joy!

Putting It All Together—in Confirmation

Speaking of joy, or lack thereof, I’ve experienced a similar dynamic when teaching Confirmation classes in past years and prior churches. When I teach Confirmation, before we begin our first class together, I have a meeting with all the students and their parents, where we review the Confirmation class requirements and expectations. And, during that short meeting the youth always hear these dreaded words come out of my mouth, “By Class #5 (out of 8), everyone will start writing your own statement of faith, which you will read aloud in front of the Session before you can finish Confirmation and join the church.” Now, judging by expressions each and every time, you would have thought that I said that phrase using Darth Vader’s voice ... so it’s probably not too difficult to imagine how the joy and anticipation that had filled the young Confirmation students when they entered the room had completely evaporated. Their worry and anxiety, and their fear and uncertainty, had robbed them of their joy.

If only I could freeze their jaw-dropping facial expressions and show them at the end of the 8 classes—once they have conquered their anxieties, fears, and worries! Because inevitably they will have done it—they will have accomplished what they once thought to be such a daunting task. They will take all that they

learn through two months of classes and conversations and *put it all together* to beautifully and brilliantly write down and articulate what they believe. And, once all that pressure's off, they no longer feel robbed of their joy, and they look forward to what comes next with anticipation and excitement.

Now, I'm often asked what types of things are covered during the eight Confirmation classes, and since it pertains to our gospel reading today I want to tell you ...

Class #1: Bible Basics—an overview of our biblical foundations ... stories, characters, events, etc.

Class #2: Being Presbyterian—elders, Sessions, Reformed theology basics, and how our faith and beliefs are expressed in our PCUSA Seal

Class #3: God as Father & Creator—the “first person” of the Trinity; our providential God who always works to bring good things out of bad situations

Class #4: God as the Son, Jesus—the “second person” of the Trinity, who makes God's extravagant love real ... the same love that is present with us through good times and bad times and that made the gift of grace possible

Class #5: God as the Holy Spirit—the “third person” of the Trinity, that makes scripture, the sacraments, and our faith come alive

Class #6: Worship & Gathering as the Community of Faith—how we are the body of Christ and a family of faith that is called to gather together for fellowship and service in Christ's name

Class #7: Prayer & Communicating with God—how we are encouraged to use a variety of methods and ways to continually be in conversation with our loving and gracious God

Class #8: Grace & Gratitude—how we receive the gift of grace and we respond with our acts of gratitude

We admittedly cover these topics very quickly, but it's enough to help any follower of Christ, of any age, gain a greater understanding of their faith and beliefs. I always enjoy watching people come to realize just how much of our faith and our practices begin to make sense during these classes. And, in the final class we *put it all together*—just like in school—taking time to create a context for why all of what we learned together matters. So we talk about the rhythm of life and faith. We talk about the gift of grace and our response of gratitude and thanks. We talk about the joy of believing in a living and loving God. We talk about how Jesus came to fulfill the law rather than abolish it. And, so we talk about keeping Jesus' commandment to love God and love our neighbor ... and why it matters so very much that we are forgiven and set free to love and serve God's world.

Putting It All Together—in our Faith

Because it mattered enough to Jesus that he took time during his farewell conversations on the night of his arrest to remind his closest friends and followers how much he loved them and why he would never abandon them. It mattered enough to Jesus to impress upon them that no worry and anxiety, or fear and uncertainty, should ever rob them of their joy. It mattered enough to Jesus to take the time to *put it all together* for them—to *put it all together* for us, for forever and all time.

And, what did Jesus tell us? He said if you love me, keep my commandments (v.15). Once again, with a slightly different choice of words, he told us to love God and love our neighbors. Jesus said that we won't ever be alone—that we won't be orphaned or abandoned—that the Spirit of truth abides with us and in us forever (v.16-18). Jesus said that those who love him will keep his word and God will be present (v.23-24). Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (v.27).

Putting It All Together—as Children of God

How's that for *putting it all together*? Now, you can take Confirmation when you are pre-teen or teenager. You can even study Confirmation as an adult (that would be fun!). Or, you can read and re-read this passage today from John's gospel as many times as you can for the rest of your lives. Either way, we come

to the same faithful and joyful conclusion ... that the presence of our living and loving God is real—as real as Jesus was sitting in an upper room that night long ago, as real as a resurrected Jesus was sharing breakfast with the disciples on the beach in Galilee as we talked about last Sunday.

So what do we do as children of a living and loving God? Well, we keep Jesus' commandments and we keep his word. We return thanks to God for the gift of grace. We love boldly and serve proudly by the power of the Holy Spirit that is with us forever and ever and ever. And, we don't worry or fear, no matter how scary or anxious or uncertain things may seem.

Because we can't let anything rob us of our joy. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." After all, God is with us ... and will be forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.