

“Beloved Community: Living Spiritually”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
The First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan – September 6, 2020

Please Read:
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

I am so excited to finally be in the sanctuary and worshipping with all of you on this my first Sunday at the First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan. The problem is of course, and you know what it is... *You* are not here!

Strangely, I’m experiencing *déjà vu* all over again. True story: On my first Sunday twelve years ago at the American Church in Paris, I mustered my confidence to march from my office to the sanctuary only to find upon entering the sanctuary that there was no one, and I mean not a soul, not even the organist. I looked at my watch. Yes, this is the right time for the service. I pinched myself. No, I’m not dreaming. Just then one of the ushers rushed from the back of the sanctuary to tell me, “Pastor Scott, you must come. The police are outside.” Apparently, there was a bomb scare and they had cleared out the sanctuary and wouldn’t let anyone enter until they were sure it was safe. After the bomb squad literally blew up a motorcycle that had been suspiciously parked near the entrance, they let us all go inside again. The joke for weeks after that was that my first sermon was a real bomb!

It was a humbling way to begin then, and it is a humbling way to begin now. We live in strange, surreal, sometimes scary and sad times with this pandemic, but in the brief two weeks that we’ve been here you have managed to make us feel very welcome. I’m reminded of the Seminary professor who once said that many a pastor come into their new church thinking they are God’s gift to the congregation, only to realize that the congregation is God’s gift to them. We look forward to that day when we can gather for worship and celebration all together as a community.

Both the gospel and Romans texts for today assume a particular *quality* of community, so in the coming weeks, I would like to invite you to reflect with me on *Christian community*. During the search process, I was intrigued by the four points of the mission statement. It says we are ***to live spiritually, love inclusively, learn continuously, and leave a legacy***. This is a unique summary of Christian community, I believe formulated by one of your former pastors, Gary Wilburn.

Today, I’d like to focus on the first point, *live spiritually*. You and I both know that more and more people are giving up on religion. It’s been said that the basis for any religion is wonder, and sadly we’ve become experts at eliminating wonder in the church! We too often major in the minors and get stuck in petty squabbles and what I call the “fussiness” of the church. You know what I’m talking about. But I think most people would agree that everyone is spiritual. I know agnostics and atheists who admit to being spiritual. And so, I love that the first pillar of our mission is so open and welcoming, inviting everyone to reflect on the inner life. The explanation of this first ideal of living spiritually is expansive. It says:

“As a ***cathedral for the human spirit*** we strive to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of our community. We believe that all of life is a theater for the Glory of God. We celebrate the interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular...”

I love the image of a cathedral and how we are called to be a “cathedral” community. We generally think of a cathedral as a place to meet with God. It’s a particularly beautiful space where one cannot help but be lifted to consider and contemplate meeting God. But a cathedral is

also a place to meet your neighbor. I would like to suggest that while we have beautiful sanctuary space here, our most beautiful “space” is our life together and the quality of our relationships.

Paul writes in our Romans text that we are to focus on love. He says, “love is the fulfilling of the law.” Then he gets all eschatological on us by saying “the night is far gone; the day is near... He’s talking about what Mary referred to last week, that liminal space between what is, and what is to be, the now and the not yet, the gap between heaven and earth. Paul suggests we need to be attentive to how God meets us in this transitional time and place, and how God calls us to meet one another anew. We’re called to wake up and live differently! Howard Thurman put it this way, “*Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*”

Our purpose in life is to come alive, to wake up to our inner life, our relationships, and how we live in the larger society. Our purpose is, as the Catechism puts it, to *glorify* and *enjoy* God. We can reflect to the world God’s glory and experience a deep joy in life when we come alive to all that is good and true and beautiful.

God knows this pandemic, social distancing and quarantines has made this complicated. God knows that the social unrest and political divisions because of racism, economic disparity and perverted nationalism has made this all the more necessary. We’re learning how desperately we need one another and how important the quality of our community life is to fully come alive.

As we go through this painful pandemic and political chaos in our country, we in the church need to learn to loosen some things up, and it begins with loving one another. What’s also surprising is how for Jesus, love requires the hard work of truth-telling as part of life together. We can’t just gloss over what’s wrong. Jesus also clearly says that in loving community there is accountability and processes for talking about sin and brokenness. Confronting sin and forgiving those who sin against us is hard. Who wants to hear about white supremacy and fragility? Greed? Addiction? James Baldwin said it well, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed if it is not faced.”

And so, we are called as a church to be *a cathedral for the human spirit*. Cathedrals are vast and glorious places of worship. What most people don’t realize is how cathedrals traditionally served as shelters for pilgrims. Sanctuaries. A safe place for *everyone*. Everyone, it’s been said, is on a journey, but it seems to me rarely do we take time to be intentional about the spiritual journey of our lives and recognize that all of us are at very different places along the way. We all have areas of doubt and questions. We all have anxieties and fears, sins and brokenness we need to face. We all need space to allow the deeper questions of life to emerge. My personality is to “hit the ground running” but perhaps it’s more important to consider what it looks like for me to hit the ground and walk with Jesus?

Pilgrimage is a metaphor for the spiritual life and the first thing any experienced hiker will tell you is that you need to slow down. We all need to learn to *saunter*. Henry David Thoreau thought *saunter* came from *Sainte-Terre*, the French for Holy Land and that *saunterers* were pilgrims *en route* to Jerusalem, literally “Holy Landers,” *sainte-terrers*. Sadly, the dictionaries and linguists all agree his etymology was wrong, but he was on the right track of what it meant to live spiritually. The holy is everywhere. God is with us all along the way.

And that changes everything. Which brings us to the two last things I want to address in our texts, one about forgiveness and the other about that strange part of the gospel text where Jesus makes the link between heaven and earth... Forgiveness is central to the gospel of God's love. We're just going to have to make that loud and clear from the beginning. That's what Jesus prayed from the cross, remember. Forgive them, Father, for they don't have a clue...

The word Cathedral comes from the Greek word which means "seat." It is the seat of the Bishop of Rome. The first one to occupy the first cathedral was, of course, Peter. He was the first Pastor. I like what Nadia Bolz-Weber says about Peter:

"I don't think Jesus chose Peter because Peter understood everything or because Peter had the best prayer life or because Peter had the mildest personality and he just "seemed" like a good pastor. And Peter wasn't exactly chosen because of his loyalty – lest we forget, it was Peter who denied Jesus. Three times, if you recall. And here's the real kicker: I don't think Jesus chose Peter DESPITE the fact that Peter would deny Jesus three times on the night he died. I think Jesus chose Peter BECAUSE Peter would deny him. Jesus knew that only a forgiven sinner could really preach the Gospel... The church of Jesus Christ could only be built on someone who knew what it felt like to be in that much need of forgiveness."

This is good news and bad news. The bad news is we can't do it alone. We can't fix this ourselves. Like Peter, we will deny Christ over and over again. The good news, however, is that as we remember how Jesus loved Peter and confronted and forgave him, and how Christ loves us and confronts and forgives us, our lives and life together will begin to resemble a cathedral for Christ.

Then, maybe then, we will come alive and learn to love, to speak truth, and forgive from the heart. Then mysteriously, the space between heaven and earth, the way it's supposed to be and the way it is, will come closer. Remember that Cathedrals are designed to lift us up to heaven, but they're also designed to remind us that in Jesus Christ, heaven has come down to us. The Celts talk about *thin places*, where heaven and earth are close. This table is a thin place. It's central to our cathedral community; where the expansive, infinite love of God is offered to you again...

Friends, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, whether or not this sermon is a bomb, I am more interested in how you will live into our mission to be a *cathedral for the human spirit*. And so I invite you to take in this spiritual food, to say yes to the Lord of heaven and earth who calls you beloved, but also calls you to live differently, to *live spiritually* as a beloved community, waking up and coming alive to God's love for you, and God's call to love your neighbors, even your enemies more and more. To be a safe place, a sacred space for all pilgrims and pagans, all saints and sinners along the way.

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.