

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Courtney Veazey
Sunday, July 7, 2024

Guide us, O God,
by your Word and Spirit,
that in your light we may see light,
in your truth find freedom,
and in your will discover your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew.

“No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’

Holy wisdom, holy word.

Thanks be to God.

Turmoil rumbles across the nation as the Reformation’s roots take hold.

The nation’s spiritual and political rebellions reach its climax, and a body of people suddenly must define themselves anew.

It is 1560, and Scotland no longer aligns itself with the Catholic Church.

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Now identifying as a Protestant nation, six ministers come together and write a new Confession of Faith in just four days. Known as the Scots Confession, it appears third in the PC(USA)'s *Book of Confessions*, following the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed.

Composed of 25 chapters, it begins with a description of an “eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible” God who creates, retains, rules, and guides by providence.¹

The Scots Confession teaches us that in seasons of turmoil, we first orient ourselves toward God's providence – toward God's caring rule of all creation.

An orientation in which we put our trust in God alone.

Our Gospel reading this morning is a snippet of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

A sermon that begins with “blessed are the poor in spirit” and “blessed are those who mourn.”² A sermon that immediately overturns the status quo as Jesus blesses those least likely to be blessed in society.

Wake Forest's Religious Studies professor Mary Woskett describes the Sermon on the Mount as “Jesus' vision of life lived according to God's vision for the world”³ – Jesus' vision of life lived according to God's vision for the world.

A world in which peacemakers, instead of warmongers, are blessed.

A world in which we love and pray for our enemies.

¹ The Scots Confession, 3.01

² Matthew 5:3-4

³ *Connections*, Year A, Volume 3, 31.

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A world in which we give without any expectation of praise.

A world in which we serve God instead of wealth.

A world in which we do not worry.

A world in which our eyes are healthy, so our whole bodies will be full of light.⁴

Jesus' vision is an expansive and imaginative one that challenges how our eyes currently see the world and perceive God's caring presence in it.

Simone Weil writes in *Waiting for God* that "Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a while."⁵

Our souls' afflictions trouble us and leave us wondering, "In the appearance of God's absence, to what do we cling? In the appearance of God's absence, whom do we serve?"

Our afflictions constrict our vision, and our bodies lose their light.

Worries trouble our souls, and instead of loving and devoting ourselves to God's providential care, we love and devote ourselves to what we think will safely guide us into the future and offer us the care for which we so achingly long.

Afflictions strangle us – causing us to lose confidence in the superiority of God's grace and in the love of Jesus Christ that accompanies us through life and death. Unsteady in our sense of self and our place in the world, we cling to wealth or any other illusory seeking that falsely promises us preservation when we feel powerless.

And our anxious souls – in desperate need of calming and quieting – forget that our life is more than food, and our body is more than clothing. Our anxious souls forget that it is our caring

⁴ Matthew 6:22

⁵ Quoted in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 125.

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God who feeds us and clothes us. Lost in a spiral of despair, we lose sight of our Creator and our place as God's creatures.

Jesus knows that our anxious worrying constricts our vision of God's providence.

So, Jesus poetically orders us to look beyond ourselves.

Look at the birds of the air and gaze at their faces. As they rest upon heaven's breezes, so they rest upon God. Remember that the God who feeds, nourishes, grows, and maintains those birds, also feeds, nourishes, grows, and maintains us.

Examine and learn thoroughly the lilies of the field. Ogle at their beauty – a beauty not made from their own toiling. Remember that the God who clothes them, also clothes us. The beauty that God places upon them is also placed upon us.

Jesus implored that we become intimate with creation, and remember our caring Creator who knows what we need – that we become intimate with creation, opening our eyes to God's vision for the world. Seek first *that* vision and restore health to our eyes and light to our bodies.

We will affirm together in a little bit that our world is sad.

I am deeply grateful that this phrasing appears in this morning's Affirmation of Faith because we do indeed live in a sad world in which today's trouble is enough for today.

As I consider the world's sadness and my own sadness, I turn to the Swiss theologian Karl Barth's understanding of providence. Barth reminds us that we must understand God's providence as revealed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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Looking upon our incarnate God, we see that God's providence does not promise us lives free from struggle, pain, or death.

Jesus flees to Egypt as a refugee.

Jesus faces the devil in the wilderness.

Jesus hears about the murder of his predecessor John the Baptist.

Jesus offers lament for his city.

Jesus experiences betrayal and denial.

Jesus loses a disciple to suicide.

Jesus is crucified.

Our God intimately knows our sadness.

The promise of God's providence is this – that the Creator who always knows what we need accompanies us in our sadness and our turmoil, offering us resurrection and soul sustenance that God alone gives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And when we doubt the good news of this promise, we follow Jesus' imperative to gaze upon the faces of creation, and in our intimate gazing, dare to see the God whom Barth describes as “never absent, passive, non-responsible or impotent, but always present, active, responsible and omnipotent. [God] is never dead, but always living; never sleeping, but always awake; never uninterested, but always concerned.”⁶

So, gaze upon the faces of the trees that wave at you through the windows this morning.

⁶ Barth, III.3, 13.

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Consider the fullness of their lives.

The seeds falling and breaking open. Roots burrowing into the soil and linking with their neighbors, as gangly limbs begin reaching toward the sky. Trunks thickening as seasons ceaselessly cycle year after year. Rain and wind rustling leaves. The breathing in of carbon dioxide and breathing out of oxygen. Branches offering homes to their fellow creatures. Decomposition that slowly returns their ashes to the earth.

An existence birthed not by their own striving, but by the preserving, accompanying, and governing grace of God. May we examine this providential grace, and re-orient ourselves to God's vision for the world.