

Moore Presbyterian Churches
April 23, 2023
Third Sunday of Easter



*Indicates to please stand as you are able.

God calls us to worship:

Call to worship:

Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 124:8)

Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.
Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord,
and He will exalt you. (James 4:8, 10)

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For He is our God,
and we are the people of His pasture,
and the sheep of His hand. (Psalm 95:6-7)

We respond in praise and confession:

Prayer of praise and supplication:

Holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

On the first day of the week
you began creation,
bringing light out of darkness,
order out of chaos,
and life out of emptiness.

On the first day of the week
you began your new creation,
raising Jesus the Christ out of the darkness of death.

On this Lord's Day,
as we gather to worship you,
supply us anew with your grace
so that we, with the rest of the church
and the whole of your creation,
may praise and adore you,
O God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

*Hymn: #257 "The strife is o'er, the battle done"

Prayer of confession (*unison*):

**Merciful God,
as we gather to celebrate your gift of love
we recall the times when we forget you
and are divided one from the other.
How often our thoughts,
our words, and our actions
have betrayed the goodness
you have shown to us.
How often we refuse to believe that you have forgiven sin and
promise resurrection
foreshadowed by Christ's own.
Forgive us, merciful God.
Mend what is broken.
Heal what is wounded.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in us a willing spirit.
Amen.**

We hear the gospel of God's grace:

*Hymn: #706 "Come let us sing"

God speaks to us:

What is commonly called "the church" is the community of people who are gathered in worship of the Triune God in the name of Jesus of Nazareth who is the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Messiah. The church is the community that bears witness to the kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Easter season is an appropriate time, as we reflect on the implications of Jesus' resurrection, to listen for God's reminders of what the church is, and what our Lord needs us to be doing.

Using the written accounts of Jesus' interactions with his disciples after his resurrection, together with the inaugural sermon of the Christian movement recorded in the Book of Acts, we're going to do just that over the next few weeks as we listen for God's answer to the question: "What is the church?"

Today, we'll consider "The Church's Focus." Next week: "The Church's Ministry", then "The Church's Structure", and finally "The Church's Conviction" which takes us to Ascension Sunday and the end of the Easter season.

To that end, let us now turn our hearts and minds to God's Word.

And, just a note for context: Our first reading is from Acts 2. The setting for this event is in the city of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We'll talk more about

that in a number of weeks. What we need to keep in mind, is that Jesus has been raised from the dead and has left his earthly disciples: He is exalted to the right hand of God in what we typically call the Ascension (a good word, but one that needs a bit of explanation – which we’ll get to in a few weeks.) A group of believers, gathered in the city on this festival day, suddenly started speaking in different languages such that, regardless of nationality, everyone who heard them understood what they were saying as they spoke about God’s deeds of power. The crowds thought this was a strange phenomenon of drunkenness, however, Peter explained that what they were witnessing was nothing more or less than the consequence of believing that Jesus of Nazareth, through whom God did deeds of power, wonders, and signs among the people, who was killed, has been raised from the dead. What you are witnessing, he explained, is nothing more – or less – than *believing* that Jesus has been raised from the dead, is seated at the right hand of God, and of *receiving* the Holy Spirit who is the life of Christ poured into our hearts and minds.

What’s more, argued Peter, this is an enactment of what the Old Testament Joel imagined would happen when God’s Kingdom broke into human reality.

So, let’s read.

Scripture: Acts 2:14-32

Psalm 16 (*read responsively*)

John 21:15-19

(*The response to: “This is the word of the Lord” is, “**Thanks be to God**”*)

The Church's Focus

1. Everyone who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah; that He is the Son of God and Lord who was crucified for the forgiveness of sin and raised from the dead, is, by God's grace, adopted into the heavenly family by the Father, made siblings of Christ, and become joint heirs with him of God's eternal promises.

Everyone who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord and Messiah, that He was crucified for the forgiveness of sin and raised from the dead is thus able to say, along with the psalmist:

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have **a goodly heritage**.*

Part of this goodly heritage, so prays the psalmist, is what he called fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore in the presence of the Lord God.

*My heart can be glad,
my soul can rejoice,
my body can rest secure.
For the heavenly Father does not abandon His beloved children
to death and despair.*

Peter used this psalm as the central text in his inaugural sermon.

He said: If this is true of David, who wrote the psalm; if a man who died – and is still dead (“his tomb is with us to this day”) – was able to have such confidence in the protection, the refuge, and the instruction of the Lord, how much more confidence can *we* have in the man who not merely prayed these words, but embodied them?!

Jesus was not abandoned to Hades [or, Sheol, the unseen place of the dead], nor did his flesh experience corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

The Father raised Jesus from the dead!

The heavenly Father does not abandon His beloved children to death and despair.

Everyone who believes in Him becomes His children by His adoptive grace and shares the goodly heritage: fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore in His presence!

2. Teresa of Avila was a 16th century Spanish nun. She was born in 1515, died in 1582, and is recognized as the patron saint of those who suffer from headaches. She suffered frequent migraines.

Teresa joined the religious life reluctantly. As a teenager, she was interested in boys, flirting, clothes, and fun. Her father deemed her to be out of control and sent her to a convent.

She never quite fully embraced the convent lifestyle. Nevertheless, as her love for God increased and her focus on Jesus sharpened, despite the ridicule she often endured and the relentless physical pain, she became a much sought-after teacher on prayer and living by faith.

Despite her chronic pain, Teresa gained a reputation for being a living testimony of that fullness of joy and enduring pleasure that is our inheritance through, with, and by Jesus Christ.

A somewhat humorous prayer, which like much good humour serves as a window into our common experience, is attributed to Teresa of Avila. And it's this:

*From silly devotions and **sour-faced saints**, good Lord, deliver us!*

Why is it, that so often, we who claim to be Christians seem to focus only on the low attendance numbers at Sunday worship, the declining (or absent) Sunday Schools, the diminished Christian influence in society and government?

If that is not the focus of our hearts and minds, it certainly is often the theme of our speech!

Why is it that so many of us who claim to be Christians struggle to pray, find reading God's Word an arduous chore, and come to church because its important to have routine?

Although we might not want to admit it, it's been my observation that by our speech, we often seem to be closer to the sour-faced saints of which Teresa was so fearful of rather than the confident David who boldly proclaimed that in the Lord's

presence there is fullness of joy, pleasures forevermore, and even resurrection from the dead!

I suggest that one reason is we're often distracted by the myriad issues and struggles of our times.

The issues aren't unimportant.

Christians have the mandate to address the issues and struggles in Christ's name and for his glory.

But there are so many pressing needs that our focus can become so broad it overwhelms us.

Jesus once said:

You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.¹

He wasn't disparaging the poor nor was he minimizing the need for his church to be engaged in services of mercy. He was simply observing that until Christ returns at the final Day of Resurrection, the issues will never go away. If one is solved, another will develop. Until the world and everything in it is fully redeemed and God's home is forever among us mortals, there will be issues. But, when you are *consumed* by the issues, you will lose Jesus. Of course, Jesus hasn't abandoned you. But you're not aware of His presence. You're not resting secure in His grace. You're not operating out of His strength. When Jesus is no longer our focus, we will become overwhelmed by the problems and we burnout. When Jesus is no longer our focus, the empty pews and classrooms, the lack of prayer in government; our own oppressive schedules, the never-ending cycles of laundry, our razor-edged budgets, our endless litany of illnesses, these consume us, drain our energy, and we go through life as if the resurrecting power of God made real in Christ is no longer.

When we no longer keep the Lord before us, our hearts become heavy, our souls burdened, and our bodies run ragged with anxiety and exhaustion.

¹ Matthew 26:11

3. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is in some sense the inaugural speech that catalyzed the global Christian movement. We'll read through it over the next couple of weeks, and we'll discover that, upon hearing his words, thousands welcomed his message, were baptized into Christ, and went on as witnesses and disciples of the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter didn't always have the confidence to testify to the almost absurd truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Messiah, who has forgiven sin by his crucifixion, and has been resurrected from the dead!

When Jesus was handed over to be crucified, Peter found himself bound in fear and despair and he denied even knowing Jesus. Three times.

Even after Christ's resurrection, the first-birth of the new creation, Peter was in danger of giving in to the despair.

Peter was the one who, at the beginning of John 21, suggested he and the other disciples go fishing. Return to their old ways. The "Christ experiment" is over.

The epitome of a sour-faced saint!

And, they went fishing.

As the story's told, thoroughly distracted from Jesus and consumed by their despair, they caught nothing.

Then, when they saw Jesus on the shore, their nets were full.

After breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside. And, three-times over, Jesus removed Peter's guilt, his shame, his purposelessness. Jesus restored Peter's place in the family of God and commissioned him a shepherd of the church.

And he preached:

This Jesus God raised up, *and* has poured out the Holy Spirit upon everyone who believes.

It is therefore impossible for those who are in Christ Jesus to be held in the power of sin, death, despair and the devil!

This is good news! Good Lord, deliver us from sour-faced saints!

4. We miss out on the fullness of joy and everlasting pleasure that is our inheritance by God's grace, and we remain bound to despair, death, sin, and the

devil, when we fail to believe that the resurrected Jesus who encouraged Peter on that beach lives today.

*He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
along life's narrow way.
He lives, he lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know he lives?
He lives within my heart.*

When Jesus asked Peter: "Do you love me?" He wasn't asking if Peter knew some stories about Jesus, or if he liked the idea of Jesus.

He was using language that only makes sense between two living people.

By his sacrificial death Jesus has forgiven sin. Yet, it was impossible for him to be held in its power. In the resurrection Jesus has proven that nothing is impossible with God, and He has begun the New-Creation, of which we are now a part when we receive him in faith.

The question he asks us is, Despite the unrelenting issues, despite our illnesses, despite our temptation to despair:

Do you love Jesus?

**We respond by affirming our faith,
offering our tithes, and prayer:**

*The Apostles' Creed

*Offering:

(Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while congregation sings:)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
praise him all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heavenly host;
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.**

Prayer of dedication

Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, the Lord's Prayer:

God our Maker,

You have walked with your faithful people in many generations,
people facing challenge and uncertainty,
people seeking your purpose and promise.

Thank you for your faithfulness to us in all situations.

Walk with us and with those for whom we pray this day,
that your grace and mercy may sustain our faith and hope.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayers.

We pray for children and young people

who must think about the future in these uncertain times.

Give them hope rooted in the knowledge that their lives matter to you.

Show them how to make a difference in the world,

whatever threats and challenges they face as they grow.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayers.

We pray for those for whom age or experience, illness or disability
create barriers to full participation in your world.

Give each one a sense of dignity and purpose.

Show them where their gifts are needed and how much they matter to you.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayers.

We pray for communities challenged by forces beyond their control:
economic uncertainty, environmental stress, natural disaster, political strife.

Give courage to those facing these crises day by day,

and wisdom to those who lead others through them,

so that wellbeing may be restored and hope for the future prevail.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayers.

We pray for our congregation, for our life together and our future in mission.
That future feels so challenging.

It is hard to read the signs of our times and respond wisely.

Sustain our fellowship and give us courage to take new paths,

so that you will find us faithful on our journey into that future.

We pray for the wellbeing of those lives linked to ours
who bring us both joy and heartache
because they matter so much to us and to you:

(Silence for 15-20 seconds)

Lord in your mercy,
hear our prayers.

God our Maker, hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken,
and use us in ways we may not yet even imagine to respond to others
with the love and mercy we see in Jesus Christ who taught us to pray together:

The Lord's Prayer

God sends us to serve and witness with God's blessing:

*Hymn: #365 "This is the threefold truth"

Benediction

Congregational Amen