



October 7, 2018

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5

Philippians 3:10-16; 4:4-9

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Pressing On toward Peace:

Flourishing Fulfilled

Today we complete our worship series, centering on flourishing. It's a familiar word that struck me anew as I read, heard lectures, reflected and planned church life last summer. It captures for me what God wants for all humans and creation. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive," wrote Irenaeus, an early church leader. I'd extend it to all creation fully alive.

How do we flourish—each person, church, community, nation, all creation—fully alive as God wants? It begins with dignity in every person, nurtured in community. No matter how much money, how perfect decisions, how twisted perspectives may seem, all have value because God creates and loves us. With dignity comes responsibility for life in others. We see with compassion, enter a situation, offer practical care, and heal harm, moved by grateful, generous, sacrificial love. It shapes our most personal relations. And we reflect that Holy Love throughout public life. We see truly, care deeply, choose thoughtfully, act courageously, pursuing justice—God's loving order of fairness and goodness shared by all. Still, chasms of separation from that loving order persist. We fight with loved ones. Society isn't fair for all. Illness strikes life as we know and expect it. Choices and consequences make us wonder if God still loves us. Amid all this separation, reconciliation remains central to living faith. Reconciliation makes God's reign of love real, helping all who feel distant from God's desire for abundant life get closer.

After last week, one of y'all felt concerned that it seemed too focused on personal problems and relations. Salvation individually, not within a wider scope of society. I'm grateful for the concern. And I agree. So, if it wasn't clear last week, let's try again. Living faithfully starts with our lives and personal relationships in God's grace. And beyond me or you getting into heaven, God's salvation is complete when Holy Love heals all creation, to live abundantly in peace. Flourishing in peace—that's our theme today. That's the Bible's vision starting with a lush garden in first stories of Genesis. Hebrews long for it on the Exodus. Prophets protest when some people don't share it. Jesus embodies that vision in all he says and does with folks like you and me or facing leaders in powerful positions as necessary. Cross. Resurrection. Holy Love breaks the power of sin and evil, raising us together in the Spirit to live as the body of Christ. Finally, as we read in Revelation, the garden gets restored, grown, entwined with city life. Flourishing.

John wrote this poetic vision to earliest Christians suffering persecution and death. Romans tore down Jerusalem and the temple—the holiest place of God's presence—reduced to rubble. The foundation and fullest expression of their faith was gone. And without question, their life felt threatened. Into that darkness of fear and loss, John beams the light of this revelation. Imagine stormy, discordant music, so loud we almost can't bear the noise, pierced by a stunningly beautiful lyrical harmony. Hearts fill. Tears flow. New Jerusalem falls from heaven, real for us on earth. It's human community, at best, entwined with and dependent on the river, the trees, with no temple. You see, God's presence again radiates everywhere. John echoes many other images of scripture, reversing troubled times—no division, no war, no suffering, no destruction or pollution. No separation from God, rather we see God face to face. That holy presence is inscribed upon our foreheads, as we, too, radiate love and abundant life in peace.

Christians over the ages, saw John's vision of the New Jerusalem in at least four ways. First, as the actual city—streets, buildings, human life within rebuilt to flourish again. Second, what personal life with God feels like, at its most peace-full. Third, what life together in church can be—our relationships and purposes, at their most peace-full. And finally, as inspiration for what we seek each week, praying for “God's kingdom come and will done on earth as it is in heaven.”

John didn't share his poetic vision to forecast literal future events, like a weather app. Rather to connect with people where they were in life, to help them feel the presence and power of the risen Christ for them personally, to inspire them to live more abundantly, flourishing together in the fullness of divine peace, beginning here and now. That's what Paul tried to do in all his letters. It's what we hear especially clearly in his letter to the Philippians. We'll read our texts for this morning in two parts. {Philippians 3:10-16}

We press on to know God's power of resurrection, bring us new life. When you stop in my office, or we chat in here or by phone ... however I listen to your joys and concerns that's the longing I sense and what I pray we all may share. When personal loss still feels tender on some anniversary or occasion that makes us remember. When work stress seems nearly unbearable, especially if rooted in things unethical. When we face impossible situations in our community and world and feel powerless to do something positive. God calls us to share the fullness of peace—more than the absence of violence, though that's a good place to start. Biblical *shalom* or *salaam* is a state of being where we flourish together full of joy, security, purpose, possibility, gratitude. John imagined his world at best. How could we have fun imagining it today? And none us knows exactly how to get there. God knows we've not yet reached that goal, that finish line, as Paul says. Still we strive, we stretch and strain like an athlete in full stride, Paul imagines—lungs burn, muscles ache, heart pounds, sweat rolls.

Friends, as we press on trying to channel peace in living faithfulness, two basic attitudes help us mature. First, as hard as we try, and we need to try hard, in the end we trust in God's grace and mercy more than our ability. As Ephesians says, we trust God's power at work among us, far beyond all we can plan or even imagine. God's Spirit moves as we share questions, ideas and insights greater than our own mental flash drive can store or compute. That's life in the risen Christ. And even when something we believe is good seems more unlikely than the Lions winning the Super Bowl, still we persist. We keep our thoughts and desires together focused on the way he lived—honorable, pure, just, true—even when life was hard, hopeless, lost on a cross. We persist in trusting resurrection will be real for us now, as every place and everything in life becomes filled with God's loving presence, like the holy temple.

Second, we rejoice. We celebrate. That's what Paul urges in the second part we're about to read. Now, he's not naïve, friends. This isn't Pollyanna optimism. He's in prison. He knows life at its worst and names it just a few sentences earlier in this letter. Still he says: rejoice! Celebrate what abundant life in peace we glimpse, here and now. Lively beauty in the jazz band here last Friday, or a symphonic ensemble in weeks ahead, like the myriad other events—like Christmas and Crescendo concerts, New Years Fest, and Orchestra Rouah for refugee children which we support. Celebrate resources for safe and stable housing—like a family Habitat home, and having fun building together—pounding nails. And Kalamazoo County Commission approved \$500,000 for housing assistance ... now we need to use it effectively. Celebrate with a plant exchange and WMU's expanded solar panel array. Celebrate teachers, students, tutors learning together. Celebrate people of different faiths worshiping and serving together. Celebrate a kind word received in here, and the countless other ways we try to make all our city into God's sanctuary full of life. Yes, maybe we need to be sensitive to time and place. Yes, don't ignore

what seems wrong with our world. Still celebrate and don't lose sight of what's good. And so, our children become aware of hunger needs, and we celebrate they are finding their voice and practical ways to help. There's always evidence of life flourishing around us. The starting point of faithfulness is to see it, claim it, and live from it.

That's why we come to this world communion table. Just as we recently celebrated 10 years of CtV, or gathered for Friday Lunch Bunch, or supper club. We share a joyful feast of the people of God. More than solemn reminder of Maundy Thursday sacrifice, this is the Easter presence of our risen Christ! We come from all directions and conditions of life to savor a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. No exclusions. No separation. A feast of life as beautifully varied as the grains and fruits and loaves Chrissy had fun arranging for us today.

As we come forward in a few moments, dear friends, pressing on with fierce determination and tender compassion through whatever we face in life, think of at least one or two reasons to celebrate. And so receive strength to persist through trouble with trust that ... wherever we are on the way to the final flourishing reign of divine peace, God is with us. God loves us. God leads us. God lives through us.

Hear again, Paul's encouraging word for us in his letter to the Philippians.

{Read 4:4-9}

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us. Thanks be to God. Amen.