

Sermon Text for October 18, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 150, Philippians 1:6, Colossians 1:28-29
“It’s a celebration”

Do you remember back on March 19 I sent out an email where I told folks that we do not anticipate being back in worship for Holy Week and Easter but when we do come back that we will have Holy Week and even the Easter Egg hunt and then I wrote these words: “so keep focused on knowing that we will be getting back to what we consider normal.” That was our plan for our first Sunday back. We were going to celebrate Easter when we were all back as if it were 1999. When I said that you know what I had in mind? A full church, 250 of us together squeezed in here with chairs out in order to accommodate the overflow. There would be no masks, no limits, no social distancing, no restrictions, and certainly no virus among us. I want that more than any of you in here or any of you watching at home.

Today’s sermon, our first Sunday back, is entitled celebration. Yet a large part of me wants to call out like the Psalmist did in Psalm 137:4: How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? This all seems so foreign. You aren’t taught this in seminary. None of us grew up knowing how to do a pandemic and how to operate and how to maneuver. How do we celebrate this Sunday when scores of our members are at home watching from afar? How do we celebrate when we have a whole slew of members who have lost loved ones during these terribly tragic times? How do we celebrate when everything is so different and normal is unrecognizable? Folks, it is our first Sunday back so I don’t want to be a Debbie downer, but this is not at all what I want or what I expected, but it is the reality, the new normal in which we live.

As we begin today my prayer for all of us is that we would be more like Paul when he states in Philippians 4:11 – “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” I wonder if we have learned this over this period of time, how to be content with whatever we have and whatever we face. Today we begin a journey together that this country and this church has not seen since 1918. Folks, we are walking in history right now. We are going through a time that historians are going to be writing about. So today we are going to look at a traditional three point Presbyterian sermon. We are going to look at how we are called to celebrate. We are going to look at how God is not done with us yet. We are going to look at how God wants us mature in Christ as we move forward together as a family that is called the church. Let’s read.

READ SCRITURE

So since we are following this traditional model of a three point sermon let's go a head and tackle the first topic which we find in Psalm 150 which is celebration. When we concluded our Lord's prayer sermon series I told you that you all had learned Hebrew and weren't aware of it. We saw the word Amen and understood it as being a Hebrew word which meant to stand firm, or to speak the truth, to shore up and secure, to be faithful. Amen has all of those definitions within the Hebrew language. Today, you are going to learn, if you don't already know, that part of your vocabular is another Hebrew word.

Look at Psalm 150 again. What phrase is repeated 13 times in this Psalm. I'm sure you heard it when Howard read it. Praise the Lord. In the Hebrew it is one phrase and it is, are you ready for it, Hallelujah. It is a composition of two words, Hallel, which means song or hymn, and Ya, which is a marker for God. This Psalm is one of my favorites to read especially for the worship committee as they are tasked with what I understand to be the most important of all the committees in the church which is to put us in a position to worship God. This is our primary task as Christians, worship God. Everything that we do as a congregation has to emanate from our worship.

This is why this time away has been so difficult. Yes, I know, we never stopped worshipping God, but you have told me that it is not the same. Of course it isn't, which just underscores the importance of us worship for any church community. We also in this Psalm are reminded of who and what is called to worship God. Look at vs.6, let everything that breathes praise the Lord. If you breathe, you should be praising God. All of creation should be praising God.

You know, we have much to celebrate in this church if you think about it. Since 2011 we have added 121 new members to our rolls. We have gone from an average attendance in 2011 of 163 with 220 on Easter to last year an average of 221 with 350 on Easter. Our income has increased from \$418,000 in 2011 to \$531,000 last year. There is much to celebrate. In the midst of identifying these facts that we ought to celebrate we fully recognize that what has been happening over these past 7 months can almost erase our memory because we simply are overwhelmed with the reality in which we find ourselves. We need to relearn what the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 34:1 "I will bless the Lord (praise the Lord) at all times." So today, we are first of all called to celebrate.

Secondly, we learn that God is not done with us yet. This is why we gather today and every week because we know that God still has work to be done through us. We read in

Philippians that the work that Jesus began in us will be brought to completion. Jesus began the work. We are called to continue it. Every month at session we have reports from all of those committees including those committees which were formed at our session retreat. So we hear about the potential that is out there for a Senior Adult Ministry that was started, but has not gotten off the ground because of this crisis. We hear about the community meals that have been organized and was ready for a launch but because of the crisis it is in a holding pattern. God began these good works and we are convinced that they will come to fruition and completion.

Folks, God is not done with us yet. There is still so much to do within this society. I think of the social ministry hub that again was ready to be launched if we had found the right person, but then our energies and our time went directly into feeding people through our food bank and ensuring that when we open we are safe. Do you believe that God still has work to do among us? I do, and I can't wait until we find ourselves in a time where we can complete this good work that God has laid out for us. That time is coming, we just have to be patient and wait until that time comes. I firmly believe that the one, Jesus, who started the work of grace here in Strasburg here at First Presbyterian will not abandon it in a state of incompleteness.

Our first point is that God calls us to celebrate at all times knowing that we are always in His presence. Our second point is that God will finish the good work that he has begun in us. Finally, God calls us to be mature in faith as we face this crisis and as we face every situation and every reality in our lives, no matter how difficult that may be. Let's look at that Colossians verse which in 1:28 uses three times the word everyone. Paul wanted to be sure that no one felt like they were immune from this directive of being presented mature to Christ.

We find ourselves in a very contentious time in our nation's history. It is so easy to be distracted and immature by a whole host of issues that distract us from our primary focus of Jesus Christ. This verse 28 ought to be the focus of everything that we do here in the church. It ought to be our motto, our motivational speech anytime we feel off kilter or out of line with what is going on. The goal of this church, the goal of worship, the goal of every single program that we have, the goal of preschool, the goal of everyone one of us when we walk in these doors ought to be that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

But we find stumbling blocks all around us. This has become a stumbling block and is used to define which side you are on more than this which constantly reminds us that we are on the side of Christ. Politics has become a stumbling block as we have taken sides which has created a false division within faith communities of who is more Christian than others. This is the only measure of faith that we have and our goal is to present everyone mature in Christ,

Republican, Democrat, and Independent and everyone in between. Don't let what is uniquely happening around us with all of its intensity create a Covid casualty of you or anyone in the church.

Folks as difficult as it might be for many of you, we are called to celebrate knowing that the good work that God has started among us here at First Presbyterian, he will bring to completion. Our goal is that we would all be presented mature in Christ even in a world that is driving us to immaturity. Stand fast, sing Alleluia, know that God is using you for His purposed, and always strive to be mature. Amen.