

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Talking Points –Love

Sunday, November 15, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements

Friends, this is the day that the Lord has made! Let us all rejoice and be glad in it. Friends, welcome to worship. Today is Sunday, November 15th and we are so glad that you are here, joining us today.

We are celebrating today as a church because last Sunday our church officially called Ashley Smith Ashley to be our next associate pastor. Thank you to everyone who took the time to vote in that congregational meeting. Now as the process continues, Ashley will go before the Presbytery of Detroit later this month and pending their approval, she will begin work here on December 1st. We thank God for the call that God has placed on Ashley's life and for her willingness and her desire to join us here at the church.

Friends, when Ashley preached here last week those of you who were here know that we had 155 people out in our parking lot. It was a glorious sunny day, and it was a wonderful experience! But you and I both know that here in Michigan, in November, we don't get many glorious Sundays of 70-degree weather. I had already, prior to Ashley, preached outside in rain, hail and snow, and although I'm trying not to read hard into that, I can tell you that, as a church family, we are trying to lead worship going forward in the way that is best and safest for everyone. So at this present time we are suspending our parking lot services because of the changing weather with the hope that we will ultimately return outside to some kind of outdoor services with a more permanent preaching perch that would allow us to battle the weather as well. I appreciate your patience with this. We know as a congregation that, right now with Covid rates going through the roof, that we cannot return to in-person worship. Our sanctuary simply is not large enough, but we are hopeful that it will not be long before we can find a way to meet again together outside in a way that is safe for all.

Friends, within our church bulletin you can find more information about the plans for worship going forward. The church bulletin is available just underneath where you're watching this sermon. There's an option or link to click on there. You will also find many mission opportunities. We are looking currently for people to help with Salvation Army bellringing in downtown Plymouth. We are also looking for "church friends"-- people within the church who would be willing to call other members as an additional level of pastoral support.

You can see throughout the bulletin, and by the news that I'm sharing, that our church, in no way, is slowing down. Next week is certainly proof of that. Next week is our Thanksgiving Sunday. Sunday, November 22nd, is also our consecration Sunday. On this special Sunday we thank God for God's gracious provision in so many areas in our lives, and as an act of devotion we respond to God's love by bringing forward our gifts to the church. If you are a member, you should have already received your estimate-of-giving card. If not, please call the church office and Stu Dodge will be able to help you. If you

did receive it, just know that you can return that by the end of the year, through the mail or electronically, or you can bring it in person next Sunday, November 22nd, between 10:00 and 2:00. I will be here, and the Bells will be here playing as part of our celebration. You can bring canned goods as well to help those in the community who are in need.

But now let us focus on our worship today. I'm pleased to be leading worship today with the help of Darlene Maginley, our children's ministry director, as well as Tom Weaver serving as our liturgist today.

Thanks always to Susan Underhill for her help bringing this service all together.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Opening Prayer

And now let us focus on God's gift of love as we turn to God in prayer. Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, we do sing your praises this day. We sing of your strength and might. We sing of your mercy and grace. We sing of your love and faithfulness. We praise you today for who you are. We praise you also for your gift of worship. We thank you for this opportunity to lift our hearts towards you. We pray that our hearts would be tuned to your Spirit, as we come into your holy presence. We cast our cares on you, dear God. and ask that you would lift all anxiety and distress from our hearts and lead us along paths of peace. We do thank you, dear God, for the opportunity to grow in faith as we trust in you. Please forgive us for the times when we doubt your love or your presence in our lives or in your world. Forgive us when we get stuck, believing that you have forgotten us or are indifferent to our pain. For your persistence, love, and grace, we thank you, dear God. We thank you for making all things new, even us. For the many blessings we've already received from your hand, blessings of family and friends, and your gracious provision, we thank you. We thank you and praise you, especially today, for the gift of your Son, for His life and death and resurrection. We offer you our worship and praise today and always. It is in His holy name that we offer this prayer of praise. Amen.

Tom Weaver – Reading of Scripture

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a (New International Version)

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never ends.

1 John 4:19-21 (New International Version)

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God sometimes we lose sight of that which matters most. Help us this morning to have hearts and minds that are open to the movement of your Holy Spirit. We pray that we may respond to the gift of your love with our love for the glory of your name. Amen.

Friends there was a story I heard several years ago about a man, an actor, playing the part of Jesus in a passion play. As Jesus, that actor carried the cross up the hill and a member of the crowd who was standing to the side started to heckle Jesus, shouting really loud insults at him and the actor clearly was getting agitated. When he could finally take no more he threw down the cross, he walked over to the heckler in the crowd, and he punched him square in the face. Now when the play was over, the director approached Jesus, the actor, and said to him, “Look, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to fire you. Jesus can’t just punch people.” But the actor begged. “Please,” he said, “Please give me one more chance. I promise nothing like this will ever happen again.”

Well, the director acting out of resources of love and grace did, in fact, give that actor one more chance. And it happened the very next day, that same actor playing Jesus, carrying his cross up the street, was again met by that very same heckler and you could see the battle raging inside of Jesus trying to keep it together, but not holding it together very well. Finally he looked at the heckler, and rather than hitting him, he said, “After this, after the resurrection, I’ll meet you in the back!”

Now you know it is hard sometimes for people who profess their love and faith in Jesus Christ to behave as Christians should. We try to carry our crosses, but if somebody crosses us, then we can lose our composure very quickly and behave in a way that is not exactly Christ-like. Sometimes, friends, our witness is in danger, not because of our inflamed anger towards another, but simply because we are exhausted and feel as though we have nothing loving to offer anyone.

In these moments, our witness is lacking because we are lacking. As a people living under a global health pandemic for the past eight months, I can tell you that many of us are limping along, struggling to live out our faith. Now add to this struggle the fact that we are moving into a time when the nights are longer than the days, the weather is cold, we are stuck inside, and the pandemic continues to get worse, we can feel as if we are truly running out of fuel and finding it very hard to have a positive and loving attitude towards anyone.

I would pause here and suggest that our struggle with finding the energy to reach out to others comes from our unwillingness to turn to God to refuel that deep source of love in our own lives. So often in life we get by on our own steam and by our own initiative and most of the time that works great. But when that falls apart we have a choice. We have a choice to fall back into God and simply let God nourish our souls, refuel our bodies, minds and spirits, or we can try to limp along, sharing what little we have left.

The book of First John, chapter 4, verse 19, tells us clearly that we love because God first loved us. To put it another way, if we hope to love others, then we must first allow God to love us. Now I know we all do that in theory, but there are times of deep need when we need to simply allow ourselves to rest in the presence of God, as He ministers to our hearts and minds and souls. We must reconnect with that deep source of grace so generously gifted to us last Sunday here at our church. Then, Ashley Smith Ashley, our new associate pastor, we hope, preached a wonderful sermon all about God's gift of grace. Within that sermon, she reminded us that grace is that gift that's freely offered to us and it is the love and forgiveness of God that none of us deserve and yet it is given to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is the love to which we claim. This is the love that we must hold on to, recognizing as it says in Romans chapter 8, at verse 35, that nothing in this life can separate us from the love of God, not trouble, not hardship, not persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or the sword. Nothing from our past, nothing in the present, nothing in the future, can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

Friends, with so much being taken away from us in this pandemic, isn't it wonderful to know that there is one thing that will never change. In life and in death we belong to God. And God's love holds us, it carries us and wants nothing more than to equip us to love others. When we realize that we are in need of God's love to be refreshed in our lives, we can turn to words like those given by the Prophet Isaiah, who in Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 30 and 31, writes, "Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

We lean into God's love every day, remembering as it says in First Corinthians that God loves us with the love that is patient, with the love that is kind, with a love that is not self-seeking. It is the way that God not only loves us, but it is the way that we are called to love others. These very famous words about love spoken from First Corinthians 13 that we so often hear at weddings, we often forget that these words were actually spoken into a really hostile environment. If you were to go back and read First Corinthians from the beginning, the first 12 chapters, you would find that these words were written to a church struggling, a church struggling with injustice, and arguing and disagreements and abuse, and within that context, the Apostle Paul brings these words about love, and how love can bring healing and hope to pain and differences and anger.

Friends are these not the words that we need to hear in our own experience of life right now. If we choose to ignore God's call to love in both our actions and our words, then First Corinthians chapter 13 tells us that our lives can become like a clanging cymbal or a noisy gong. In other words, we may be saying one thing about our faith with our words, but if our actions don't match our words, then all people will see is this pounding in our lives, this noise that does not reflect God's character but reflects the disassociation between our words and actions. First Corinthians reminds us that you can be the smartest person in the room, but you can still not have love in your life. First Corinthians 13 reminds us, also, you could be the most spiritual person in the room, or even the most generous, and still not be loving. Our words and actions must match if we are to serve as God's witnesses of love and grace.

Apostle Paul writes, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge but have not love, I am nothing." We are called in this passage from First

Corinthians to examine our hearts and consider our witness towards one another. Do our actions and words match?

If I were to answer this question in my own life, I would have to say on some days 'yes', but on other days really, really 'no.' The challenge for us all is to have more 'yes' days, more days of consistent witness, than 'no' days. But on those days when we fail, we are always invited back into that deep well of God's love on offer to us. We simply need to seek, ask, knock, pray for those extra resources of love and grace, hope and peace.

Friends, whenever we have the opportunity to share love with others we have the opportunity to share God's love. So I encourage you today to let your words and actions meet, allow God's spirit to lead you to reach out to others in need, and--be it through a phone call or encouraging note, be it through a conversation—let God's love shine through you as you reflect the love of God at work in your life and in the world today.

May God help us to live lives of consistent witness. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Tom Weaver – Prayers of the People

Will you please join me in prayer. Let us pray. Dear heavenly father, we thank you, Lord, for the creation of this very day, a day when we come together to worship you. Thank you for all your good gifts. We thank you, Lord, for the gift of Ashley Smith Ashley and for her husband Brendan. We pray for your blessing on her as she proceeds in the coming days to work with our Presbytery in finalizing her call to our congregation.

Dear Father, we lift up in prayer all those in our church and in our families who are in need today of your loving, healing touch, those who are ill, are in pain, are in mourning. Be with them, we pray, and provide comfort, healing, and peace. Lord, we pray also for those who love them, and for their caregivers, that they also may be comforted by you, knowing that in all things you work for the good of those who love you.

Lord, we pray today for our nation and for the three great challenges of this year, of the Covid infections, of racism and injustice, and the elections. We pray for healing for all suffering from COVID-19 and its ravages and we lift up and pray for our health care workers who work so hard on our behalf to help the ill. We also pray for those developing the vaccines to help reduce the numbers of infections.

Lord we pray for our new leaders at all levels of government that they may be strengthened and sustained in you, and may they seek loving service rather than power and glory. Lord we pray for healing within our country from the divisiveness of the election and all of its postludes and we pray for healing from racism and injustices that are far too prevalent today.

Show us, teach us, the way of love that you would have us follow. Guide us, comfort us, through your Holy Spirit, we pray, because it is with you and through you, that true healing takes place. Lord, forgive us when we are a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. We know that when we look to you, Lord Jesus, that we can do better, we can be better with your help. May we show your love to one another, to our brothers and to our sisters, actively, positively, and with hope, knowing that love never fails.

And we lift up all these prayers, both spoken and the quiet prayers in our hearts, to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth

as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Benediction and Blessing

Friends, as we go from here today let us go remembering that God is Love. The scriptures tell us that whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them.

Go forth from here today to share that love which has already been so generously showered upon you and as you go, may the blessings of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.