

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Talking Points –Talking with Gratitude

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever. Friends, good morning, and welcome to worship on this Sunday, November 22nd. Today is a special day in the life of our church, as today is our Thanksgiving celebration. It's a service where we focus completely on all the blessings that God has gifted to us, and we offer God in response our praise, our prayers, and the gifts of our lives.

Friends, as we come into God's presence today, we do so in worship, but also we come together physically. Between 10:00 and 2:00 today, here in the church parking lot, there is an opportunity to safely bring in your church pledges for the coming year. As I said, this is an act of devotion and love in response to the blessings that God has gifted us. Friends, if you desire to bring your pledge in to see some of the church family, please do so! There are special gifts waiting for you here. But I can also tell you if you would prefer or feel safer mailing in your pledges or submitting them electronically, those are also options available to you.

As a church family we are celebrating today, because yesterday at the Detroit Presbytery meeting, Ashley Smith Ashley was officially approved to be our Associate Pastor! It is with joy and gratitude that we praise God for the gift of Ashley's ministry among us. Ashley will officially begin December 1st. And December 6th, if you tune into our worship service, she will be preaching here officially for the very first time.

Friends, we are celebrating as a church even while we recognize that life is very different for us. As we go into our Thanksgiving celebrations this week, I certainly wish every family joy and peace and good health in their celebrations and pray that you would recognize that God has blessed us even in these days of challenge.

I also hope, as we move beyond Thanksgiving into Christmas, that you will join us for our Christmas Carol celebration on Sunday, December 13th, at 5:00 p.m., here in our church parking lot. If you come at that time in your vehicle, which we ask you to pre-register online beforehand, we can tell you that what you'll hear through your car radios is our church chancel choir singing outside, socially distanced, and masked. They'll be singing through your car radio and we will provide song sheets and you'll have the opportunity to sing along in your car without a mask to your heart's content! As you come into the parking lot on that Sunday, December 13th, you'll be offered hot chocolate, and Christmas cookies—all that you can enjoy while we sing the carols of Christmas together. We hope you'll join us for this special event.

Now let me also remind you as part of our Christmas celebration we also seek to serve others in our community and there is a chance for you and your family to do that by helping ring bells for the Salvation Army Christmas drive. There's a signup sheet on our church website. We ask that you would take a look and choose an available slot to ring the Salvation Army Bell in downtown Plymouth.

Now friends let us prepare our hearts on this Thanksgiving Sunday. Let us quiet ourselves as we listen to our chancel choir sing for us that amazing anthem, "Enter His Gates with Songs of Thanksgiving."

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Opening Prayer

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we do enter your holy presence today with Thanksgiving. We come with praise in our hearts because we recognize that you have blessed our lives in ways too numerous to count. For the gift of life and for the promise of eternal life, Lord, we thank you and praise you. For the gift of family members and friends, we thank you, holy God. For food, for shelter, for opportunities to be able to weather this storm due to your gracious provision, we thank you, dear God. Help us every day to be able to count our blessings, rather than focus on all that is wrong. Help us, Lord, to see you in every situation. We are asking during this time of worship that we would lift our eyes to you, so that our hearts and our minds and our souls may praise you fully. Lord, please receive our praise and gratitude this day. We ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Reading of Scripture

Psalm 100: A Psalm of thanksgiving.

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell -- Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, we are thankful today for everything, for every blessing, every challenge, every opportunity, every experience of waiting. Help us in every situation, at all times, to see you and draw near to you. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

2020--what a year! It will be interesting in the months and years ahead to see how this particular year is remembered. It may be that when 2020 is referred to in the future it will be referred to as a wasted year. But I hope any future commentary will dig deeper than that. My hope would be that years from now we are able to reflect intelligently, not only on what we lost in this year, but also on what we found. What if, in 2020, it is, as one Facebook post said, the year we have been waiting for, a year so uncomfortable, so painful and scary, that it finally pushes us to grow. Perhaps this will be the year that screamed so loud that we are finally wakened from our hibernation. Perhaps this is the

year that we finally accept the need for change, declare change, work for change, and become the change. What if 2020 isn't wasted but rather becomes the most important year of them all.

These certainly are interesting thoughts and ideas for us to ponder, but one thing I know for certain about this year whereas so much of what has happened in this year is completely outside of our control, the one thing that both you and I can control is where we put our focus in the midst of all of these storms. What will our attitude be in response to each and every single challenge we encounter? Psalm 100 reminds us to keep our focus on God, because it is he who made us and we are his, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Now I know, if you are like me, you do not like to be referred to as a sheep! But inasmuch as sheep are prone to wander away from their Shepherd and find themselves lost, alone, and afraid, we are like sheep. We need help when we find ourselves lost and the Lord is not only our Shepherd, but he is our Good Shepherd whose intentions for us are good. His love endures forever, his faithfulness continues through all generations.

We can spend our days focusing on all that we have lost. We can spend our days focusing on our pain, worry, anxiety, our grief and fears, or we can choose to cast all of those feelings on God who cares for us. Because of this invitation by God, because of this constant care and faithful protection by God, we can rest in the truth that no matter what happens to us in the remainder of this calendar year and no matter what happens to us during the remainder of this global pandemic, God's character and promises to us do not change. We can build our lives upon them. God's love and faithfulness hold us completely in this life and throughout eternity.

Psalm 100 is brief, but it is very clear in its teaching. If our focus remains on the One who does not change, then our hearts will, in fact, change. They will change because they will grow in gratitude, thanksgiving and praise.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of Psalm 100, coming from The Message version, captures this idea of our hearts growing in gratitude, praise and thanksgiving.

Listen to this paraphrase of Psalm 100.

- 1-2 On your feet now—applaud GOD!
Bring a gift of laughter,
sing yourselves into his presence.
- 3 Know this: GOD is God, and God, GOD.
He made us; we didn't make him.
We're his people, his well-tended sheep.
- 4 Enter with the password: "Thank you!"
Make yourselves at home, talking praise.
Thank him. Worship him.
- 5 For GOD is sheer beauty,
all-generous in love,
loyal always and ever.

Gratitude is the praise that comes naturally when we keep our focus on God throughout our lives. When we choose to focus on God's character, rather than our own experience, gratitude is the natural byproduct. As Christians, one of the most important lessons we can learn in this journey of faith is the importance of giving thanks in all circumstances.

This call to give thanks is repeated throughout the whole of scripture. The video that was shown online ended with that great verse from 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 18, which says, "Give thanks in all things." If we are able to give thanks in all things, no matter what we go through, we will be lifted above our circumstances into the presence of God.

There is always a reason for us to praise God and to offer God our worship in gratitude. We will be reminded of this truth at the end of this sermon today as we listen to our chancel choir sing one of my all-time favorite anthems, "For the beauty of the earth", by John Rutter. In that anthem they go through item after item which calls us into praise, items like for the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night, hill and vale and tree and flowers, sun and moon and stars of light. Lord of all, to thee we raise this our joyful hymn of praise."

We lift our voices in praise as we lift our eyes to God's gracious provision. Friends, I know for many of us it's hard to think about this year, 2020, ending with a hymn of joyful praise. It doesn't seem as if there's much to be thankful for. And yet God has reminded us through this year that he has not left us, that he is here, that he desires to strengthen us, to help us, providing us constantly with his gifts of hope and strength and peace.

Within our own church I see God actively at work, even through challenging circumstances, as we have learned how to worship God in creative ways and through new technology, as we have experienced fellowship through different avenues, as we have learned how to reach out in service to others in new and exciting ways. In each of these ways, we see God's spirit leading.

I see God's Spirit leading in the call of Ashley Ashley to our church, in the call of Mark Hovermale to our church, both of which happened during this pandemic, as well as the call of new elders and deacons. God continues to lead the church forward just as God continues to lead each of us forward. All of us have the opportunity on this Thanksgiving Sunday to respond to God's faithful presence, to respond to God's leadership through our praise and through the gifts that we offer God with our lives.

I pray that our gratitude would not be limited to one Sunday but would extend to, not only every Sunday, but every day of our lives. As we lift our attention off our present circumstances and on to the One who is eternal, we can trust that there will always be a reason to offer God our thanksgiving, gratitude and praise. To God be the glory, today and always. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Prayers of the People

Let us pray. Lord, we come before you and praise your name. We thank you for being all powerful, all loving, full of grace and we thank you for your Son who we celebrate this season, in particular, for the gift of salvation. Through Him, we count on your grace. We know we mess up. We thank you for your forgiveness, that comes through your grace. We take time now and pray for the frontline workers, for the scientists and companies working toward a vaccine to end this pandemic. We pray that vaccine or the vaccines work. For those who have lost their jobs, we pray. For the restaurant workers and

owners who have lost wages and possibly their restaurants, we pray specifically for them. We pray for all who are hurting, whether because of the pandemic or just because of the season. We pray for them and for your peace. We thank you for the blessings of the gifts of time and talent by our congregation. We also want to thank you for the financial gifts our congregation is committing this season for our church ministry. We pray blessings on them for their faithfulness to you. We know that when we are hurting, we can come to you in prayer.

We pray, using the words your Son gave us as an example for prayer 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, let us go from here with hearts full of praise. Let us go from here with an attitude of thanksgiving and let us share with others all that God has done for us.

And as we go, may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.