

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Life Together – Forever and Ever and Ever

Sunday, October 4, 2020

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome, Announcements, and Opening Prayer

Friends, good morning, and welcome to worship at First Presbyterian Church Plymouth. Today is October 4th and we're so glad that you have joined us today. As you can see, we are here in the sanctuary and we are dressed up in our ministerial garb only because today is a special day in the life of the church. Today is World Communion Sunday. Christians throughout the world today will be celebrating communion together.

Friends, now may be a really good time in our service for you to pause and to gather your own communion elements at home. Please find whatever you have available that you can use as a bread and fill your cup with what you have on hand, and you will be ready immediately at the end of our service to move into communion together.

Before we turn our attention to this service, I just want to highlight some of the services that we have coming up here in Plymouth. Next Sunday October 11th is a special Sunday because our choir will be leading the whole of that worship service. This is our annual gospel choir Sunday. By the miracle of video technology we have the choir singing from various years' gospel anthems, plus with some new aspects added to it, and so I hope you will join us for that service next week.

I can tell you October 18th is another special Sunday, in that our confirmation class which completed the class last May is actually joining the church on that day. You will see them within our video recorded service joining the church and we want to be able to celebrate with them and their entrance into our church family.

If you are interested in joining our church family, I can tell you that on that same day, October 18th, from 12:00 noon to 1:30, we are holding a new member class via Zoom. Not only will we have the opportunity to join together, but we will bring lunch to your house in the form of a Panera boxed lunch, which we will leave with you, along with some new member supplies, so you will be ready to go. If you're interested in finding out about this class, you can sign up on our church website.

Going forward, one last opportunity for you to sign up on our church website is on Wednesday, October 21st. Here at the church building we are holding a Red Cross blood drive. We realize the urgent need for blood at this time, and so we invite you to consider giving if you are able in this way. You can sign up either through the Red Cross website for our church on that Wednesday, October 21st between 9:00 and 3:00, or you can sign up on our church website.

We hope to have you a part of all these special events, but now for our service today, I want to take a minute just to thank Cheryl Scott Lindberg who is here as our special musician. She is playing her French horn during communion, playing "Be Thou My Vision", while her mother Sue Scott, whom we all know and love, will be accompanying her on the organ. My thanks also goes today to Mark Hovermale for serving as our liturgist, and to Susan Underhill for using her video skills to bring all of these elements together.

[Prayer]

Gracious God, we do sing your praises today. 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 the gift of this World Communion Sunday. Thank you for calling us into a family of faith that extends beyond our congregation and mission partners, but encompasses the whole world and the whole company of heaven, We thank you for the new

opportunity to grow in faith as we surrender ourselves to you. Please, dear God, forgive us for the times when we doubt your presence in our lives or in the world. Forgive us when we get stuck thinking that change is not possible. We thank you that, in You, all things are made new, even us. We thank you, dear God, for all of life's blessings and we recognize that these are possible only because of your gracious provision. We thank you especially today for your Son; it is in His name that we pray this prayer. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Introduction to Sermon Theme and Scripture Reading

Today in the sermon we are finishing our series on “Life Together”, which is simply just learning how to do life together, when we're apart, when the storms come, and in the desert. Today we're looking at eternity. Now, eternity is something that we all know is coming, but many times even in church, we don't talk much about it. We're looking at life together in the most complete sense possible—eternity, and how does it impact our lives today and going forward.

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-7

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:12-13

¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, for the hope and promise of heaven we give you our thanks and praise. Lord, right now we see you only dimly. Open our eyes this day to the wonders of your love and grace. This we pray in your most precious name. Amen.

Friends, over the last four weeks we have been looking in our sermon series about how we live our lives together with God and together with one another. We would be remiss in this series if we didn't pause to consider what do our lives with God and with each other look like as we look into an eternity with God, a life where we will live forever and ever and ever and ever together.

Well perhaps I have been watching too much Disney Plus and seeing the musical Hamilton a few too many times, because I cannot hear those words “forever and ever and ever and ever” without thinking of King George III singing the song, “I’ll Be Back” from that musical. Those of you who are familiar with it will know the song that I mean, where King George sings to his subjects in America, his sweet submissive subjects, his loyal Royal subjects, forever and ever and ever and ever. This promise to care for these subjects comes right after he threatens to send them a fully armed battalion, to remind them of his love!

Clearly, this is not the type of ‘forever and ever and ever’ that we are hoping for when it comes to God! Thanks be to God, this type of existence is not at all how heaven is described. God's promises about heaven are found throughout the whole of scripture, but Revelation, chapter 21, the first 7 verses, gives us some concrete details for us to hold on to today. In verse one it says that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, for the first (earth) had passed away and there will no longer be any sea. Now let me stop you right there, because I know someone listening out there today is either a huge lover of the ocean or perhaps a marine biologist and you are very upset to have heard the sea will no longer exist. Well, I'd ask you to suspend your anger and judgment for just a minute, because you should know that ‘the sea’ in biblical times refers to anything threatening or dangerous. It does not necessarily mean the actual sea will disappear. In the time of Jesus, unexpected loss and death and danger often came as a result of unpredictable seas, which is why it is referred to in this negative connotation. So when the Bible says that the sea is gone, I want you to fully comprehend that this is actually a wonderful incredible gift, for it means that there is, in the world ahead of us, no longer any sudden unexpected or tragic loss. There's no more danger or threat for us in the world but more than that, Revelation chapter 21 tells us in verse four and five there's also no more tears in heaven, no more death or mourning, no crying, no pain.

Just before that, it says God will be there living among his people and God himself will be with his people and God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Who would not want to live in this place, free from pain or danger or grief? Revelation chapter 21 goes on to say that those who are victorious will inherit all of this, and God says that I will be their God and they will be my children. Now did you catch the beginning of that verse. Verse seven says those who are victorious will inherit all of this. Well, what does it mean to be victorious? To be victorious is not the same thing as we think of victorious on this side of heaven. We think of victorious as being successful in life. It can mean being successful in business or it can be being popular or financially successful. But to be successful in heaven is an altogether different thing. Being successful in heaven means that we are actually dependent upon God throughout the whole of our lives, in thick and thin we rely on God.

Friends, victory even in this definition needs to be further expanded in our own thought process, because if you consider the whole witness of scripture, what we find there is that we are indeed called to trust and rely on God throughout the whole of our lives. We are also called to recognize that God's hold on us is greater than our hold on him. The witness of scripture tells us that God is faithful to us even when we are not faithful to God. We may fail but God never fails. Our witness can flicker like a candle, but it will never go out completely, because God will not let it happen! More than that, scripture tells us that God's grace is greater than our failure.

I am so thankful that the Bible talks repeatedly throughout the gospels about the experiences of those first early disciples because in their stories we see mistakes and failures. We see doubts and power struggles, we see pride and need, deep need, In their lives we also see that when they fall, God picks them up. We see when they stumble that God helps them. When they scatter, God gathers them back together. God welcomes each of them back into the fold like the prodigal son and the father who runs to embrace him. As a reminder of God's love and of God's grace extended to us each day, God has given us these amazing gifts of His Word and His Spirit and the sacraments to remind us of God's active presence in our lives on a daily basis.

So now, dear friends, as we try to live lives that are victorious, as we rely on God's love and grace, we also look to the hope of heaven. First Corinthians, chapter 2, at verse 9 says this about heaven. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived what the Lord has planned for those who love Him. We cannot even imagine what God has in store for us! In First Corinthians, at verse 13, after that long passage about love, it says, “Right now we can only see

things dimly, but one day we shall see fully, even as we are fully known.” It also says that faith, hope and love will remain in this life, and the greatest of these things will be love.

Heaven is that place known for love and healing and grace. And that, friends, is what our lives together with God and together with one another looks like as we move forward. We can go forward trusting that full healing and full joy in God's Kingdom is ahead of us, trusting that one day we will celebrate in God's presence forever and ever and ever and ever. That will be a beautiful thing in these difficulties where we are scattered from one another! Let us cling to God even now, remembering God's amazing love and grace. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sacrament of Communion

Friends, Jesus has said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, all who are gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Would you all please pray with me. Loving God, on this world communion Sunday, we are reminded that this communion table and elements that we receive from it are not our own but belong to you. You offer them freely to your children throughout the world everywhere, regardless of race, gender, age, or circumstance. We are privileged to be among your children, claimed by your grace. We pray today for anyone in need, for all who struggle in the wake of this global pandemic. Lord, we pray for anyone whose lives may have changed by the physical or financial effects of this virus or from recent storms. Lord, we pray, please bring your help, healing and comfort. We thank you for the hope that stands before us with the promise of heaven. We thank you for the saving work of Jesus Christ, in the hope and fulfillment of his life, death, and resurrection, what it offers to us all. We pray today for anyone who is finding life challenging at this time, we pray for our teachers and students and families juggling work and learning in new landscapes. We pray for those who work and for anyone looking for work, for those who are sick and for those who care for the sick. We pray for those who search for a cure. Please bring wisdom and strength to them, we pray. We pray, dear God, for peace within our world and peace within our nation. We pray for peace within our minds and hearts. In this communion meal, dear God, remind us once again that we are one, not only with our brothers and sisters around the world, but with the whole communion of saints. We thank you for their lives, for their witness, and for their faith. May the grace and love that we find here at this table be extended to all who hurt and all who are in need, all who feel lost or alone today. This we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son, who is taught us when we pray to say together, 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.

Friends, on the night that he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread, and after he gave thanks to God his father he broke it saying, “This is my body that has been broken for you. Do this in memory of me.” In the same way after supper Jesus took the Cup saying, “This Cup is the new covenant, sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord until he comes again.” These are the gifts of God, given to the people of God. Let us now share this communion meal together.

Let us pray. Holy God, for the joy and blessing of bread and cup, for this time away from our frantic existence, for the opportunity to come into your presence and honestly bring the needs of our lives, we thank you. We live into the hope that is offered us here, this day, through your Son Jesus Christ. We share this hope, we live into it and proclaim it as good always. Thank you dear God for the gifts of your abiding love and grace. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Blessing and Benediction

Friends let us go from here today with our eyes fully fixed on heaven. Let us go from here full of hope and strength and by God's grace. And 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.