

Sermon for November 3, 2019
The Fourth Letter to Westwood: Transformative Life

Texts: Psalm 90:1-6, 10-12, 14, 16-17; Luke 2:22-38

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Westwood, with the elders and deacons.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel, from the first day until now. I am confident of this: that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.

In this, my final letter, brothers and sisters, I wish to talk about a vision for the church. I wish to talk about imagination or, more precisely, holy imagination. I wish to share again an image of resurrection; of what we can be standing firm in the Lord, growing in faith and faithfulness.

As one author puts it, “Resurrection, it seems, is fundamentally different from revival or resuscitation. It does not produce the familiar, the immediately recognizable. It takes death into account and honors the gone-ness, of that which went before. It is both the same and not the same. The sameness comes in the sacred; in breaking bread and sharing the cup, in the waters of baptism – all of which point toward the death and resurrection of our Lord. The sameness reveals the holy link between the old and the new. Resurrection brings the discovery that what we **thought** was most important and the most recognizable in that which is gone was – in fact – not it at all.¹

“We cannot expect that resurrection in our church will be any less frightening, any less hard to recognize, or any less shocking than the resurrection that is central to our faith. We cannot claim resurrection as something we are able to accomplish, or call forth on our own. Resurrection is not the fruit of our hard work, our outstanding vision, or our determined creativity.²

“Church growth is all about revival and resuscitation. Revitalization of that which has fallen into decline may be a fine goal in some cases. But it is NOT the same as resurrection. Offering ourselves and our churches for resurrection, means embracing a sure and certain death. We will not be as we are now, not once God is finished with us. We will not look or feel or smell the same, and yet that which has always been holy about us will be holy still, only revealed in new ways.³

“Whether the church is fifty or three hundred years old, it is no longer the church it was when it started. The speed with which historic churches like ours are called to reinvent themselves, is inversely proportional to the speed in which they are able to move. Growth programs that promise results measure faith by size, bind resurrection in churches and blame the faithful for the changing world have little good news for us. They lure us with promises of success, when our faith calls for a willingness to die.

¹ Olson, Anna B., *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 10

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

“Resurrection is no easy way to new life. It tosses out our comfortable hopes for the familiar ...and rewrites the future in spite of us. Resurrections is God’s alone.⁴ Our part in it is the dying. Whether it involves the death of old ways of thinking, or old ways of doing – simply because they no longer work, or are no longer sustainable – or old ways of being, there can be no resurrection without death of some kind. Some may find this troubling, but isn’t the life of faith meant to be transforming? How can we truly follow Christ and **not** be transformed? Do we **truly** believe, or are we just confessing with our lips that God is always working through us to bring about change in others and in ourselves?

Our Lord Jesus, is the role model for transformation. He came into the world and transformed it, by showing us a new way to look and see. On the mountain of Transfiguration, He offered a preview of our own transfiguration: a preview of how we will be transformed in body, mind and spirit. There is great power in transformation, just as there is great power in how we can change the world through God’s love.

Essential to this is the understanding that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We remember our brother Paul’s words, that “**We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**” Paul was convinced that “**Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers; nor things present, nor things to come; nor powers, nor height, nor depth; nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

But even as we experience this incredible connection, there are still those who experience what they believe is separation from God. They need our care. One way of addressing this isolation and loneliness is to create support networks of elders and deacons that help people remain connected to the church by establishing relationships and thus be nurtured by those relationships.

So many are under the mistaken belief that they must have certain skills for this; that we need to know exactly what to say or do to be of any benefit. This is simply not true. Remember, beloved, that God doesn’t call the equipped, God equips the called. In context of community, people learn from each other’s victories and mistakes. Relationships can grow and flourish, even amid trial and testing. The key lies in the connection and common ground found in love for God. It enables people to transcend differences. It enables us to overcome their discomfort and fear. The great challenge facing the church is connecting people into loving relationships, limiting human isolation and maximizing communion. For the church in our time – for **our** church – it must be less about religion and more – **much more** – about relationship.

We must challenge the stereotypes by inviting people to share their stories and demonstrate how **our** story and **their** story fit in to **God’s** story. In many ways, brothers and sisters, we need to re-discover the value of communing with each other and with God outside of Sunday morning. We need to learn how to once again become a faith community, rather than simply a weekly meeting place.

⁴ Ibid.11

God, as shepherd, provides all that people need. But God's people – shepherds ourselves, those who follow the Good Shepherd – must direct people into God's pastures.

The Body of Christ, here in Westwood, must reach out to isolated individuals, even those that are not homebound or living in care facilities, those who we frequently encounter on Sunday morning and reconnect them with the community where encouragement, nurture and protection are available.

A key part of our existence is to provide support, safe-keeping and sustenance for all people. A place where they are missed when absent and remembered, even as their own memories fail and they lose the ability to tell their stories. They need others to tell their stories well. They need people who will hold them and remember them properly. If not us, who? If not now, when?

We can do this! We **can** tell their stories well. We can remember, because even those who can no longer remember God, still live in the memory of God. The memories of God are reflected and enacted in the practices of the community that gathers around the resurrected Christ. We do that every All Saints Day, when we light candles in memory of those we lost that year. The power of the Resurrection is the binding force that underpins the community, both now and in the future. God's active memory finds embodiment in the community of memory and resurrection. For it is within that community that we discover what God's memory looks like. We are called to attentiveness. We are called to pay close attention. Most of all, to God, the Rememberer, Bearer and Sustainer of our identity – our **true** identity given at our Baptism. It is **here** that our worship finds its **focus** and its **goal**.

But the members of Christ's body are also called to be attentive to one another and, in particular, to those who are lost, forgotten, those who may be considered weak and vulnerable. A church that remembers well, and is attentive to the needs of people, is a church that is remaining faithful. My question for our church is this: Should this not be our goal?

We can be a community where there are people to listen, accompany and love them in simple ways. Ways such as offering rides to worship, church activities, doctor's appointments and so forth; ensuring that they receive regular visitors when they can no longer physically be a part of the community. In this way, they experience a sense of connection to the church that they have known and loved, and likely have been a part of for most of their lives. We must say that with them: "I belong to Christ. To them, through Christ, I belong. To me, through Christ, they belong." No longer am I isolated from them. We share life. We share Christ. Community, koinonia is only built on the "we.

It is not built on the "I," or the "us." It is based on "being with" someone, not just "doing for" someone. It means sharing their suffering, touching their hurts, being silent in their despair and it involves walking alongside them and being willing to stay with them. It involves hearing, listening, talking, even – when appropriate – touching. In involves building and fostering patterns of relating. It involves breaking down barriers through sharing stories and experiences. It involves finding common ground and ways of connecting through giving, receiving and being.

This is the principle behind a life lived in a caring faith community. But that is actually just the beginning and I speak now to those who need help now; or who may need it sometime in the future. To them I say that allowing others to be a blessing to us is desired by God.

Asking for help is hard. Sometimes we avoid doing so out of fear that it admits failure, or that we will be a burden to others. Many of us, a good deal of the time, prefer to struggle. We bear down and pretend that everything is fine. We isolate ourselves. We suffer silently. We tell ourselves – and are convinced – that there are some things we do not – must not – talk about. But in doing this, we are actually missing God’s design for our need. God said that it is not good for people to be alone.

And so it has, in fact, been God’s design for us to need help and give help to each other. We are – as I have reminded you – commanded to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” We know too, as our brother Paul knew well, that God’s grace is sufficient for us, and that his power is made perfect in weakness. God’s plan for us in times of need is so clear, why do we insist on isolating ourselves? Why do we not allow God to work through others? We can find freedom and strength in knowing that God has designed us to need help, and we honor him in asking for it.

As Thomas Merton wrote, “We must be willing to accept the bitter truth that, in the end, we may have to become a burden to those who love us. But it is necessary that we face this also. The full acceptance of our abjection and uselessness is the virtue that can make us and others rich in the grace of God. It takes heroic charity and humility to let others sustain us when we are absolutely incapable of sustaining ourselves. We cannot suffer well unless we see Christ everywhere, both in suffering and in the charity of those who come to the aid of our affliction.”⁵

Here is a secret: One of the fundamental aspects of faithfulness – living out one’s faith – is understanding that asking for, and accepting help, does not equate to weakness. It is really a strength. When we work alone we focus only on surviving. When we work together our focus expands and we actually begin to thrive. We go fast alone. We go further together. This is the very **definition** of church.

I am convinced that this, difficult as this might seem, is what faithfulness looks like and that this is the kind of church that God is calling us to be. We must learn to “**Number our days, that we may present to God a heart of wisdom.**” We can do this! It will take time and effort and prayer, but we can do this! It will not be easy, but taking up one’s cross never is and was not meant to be.

I look forward to working alongside you, as we work towards God’s vision for our church and will return to you soon. In the meantime, I will say that we can do this, because God honors those who honor God. We can do this because of God’s faithfulness and the strength for the journey that God has long provided God’s people.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6512695-we-must-be-willing-to-accept-the-bitter-truth-that>

Speaking to our ancient ancestors in exile, God gave these comforting words: **“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 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.”**

As I close, beloved, I exhort you: Keep alert. Stand firm in your faith.
Be courageous. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.
Put things in order. Listen to my appeal. Love with one another. Live in peace.
And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body, be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful. He will do this. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this! Beloved, pray for me. Greet one another with a holy kiss. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.