

The Heavens Are Telling - What Do You Hear?

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Psalm 19

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
- ⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hidden from its heat.
- ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
- ⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
- ⁹ the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
- ¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹² But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
- ¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
- ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Matthew 21:33-46

³³ ‘Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ ⁴¹They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’

⁴² Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord’s doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes”?’

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Today is a big and busy day in the Presbyterian Church. As World Communion Sunday, it is the favorite day of the church calendar for a pastor friend of mine, beyond Christmas and Easter. He undoubtedly invited his congregation to dress in apparel from other cultures, and will do so himself, congregants who come from different cultures will be asked to help lead worship, and musical instruments from other countries will be used. I think those are fine acknowledgments of the day but that’s not quite my speed. I do believe today is worth lifting up. In fact, the co-incidence with the collection of the Peacemaking Offering adds to the day’s significance. You may have noticed my note in the bulletin last week about World Communion Sunday. If not, let me recap it for you. World Communion Sunday originated in the Presbyterian Church in 1936. From the beginning, it was planned so that other denominations could make use of it and, after a few years, the idea spread beyond the Presbyterian Church. Today, World Communion Sunday is celebrated in many denominations and emphasizes Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. As part of our remembering that we are not an isolated church, but a member of the body of Christ in the world, we collect a Peacemaking Offering, with 75% of the monies collected providing help worldwide and 25% being used for local mission.

Such an emphasis on worldwide mission makes sense on World Communion Sunday, when we make a special point of remembering that we are in communion with others, in community with others. As First Presbyterian Church, or even as the Presbyterian Church (USA), we are not an island. We are

supported by other congregations in our denomination, as well as in our Christian faith. Likewise, we are also accountable to other congregations both in our denomination and beyond denominational borders. We are a member of the body of Christ. As Paul told the Corinthians,

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Today, we join with our brothers and sisters around the globe in sharing in the feast of communion. Whether we partake of white bread or rice cakes or naan or tortillas, we partake in a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet, focusing not on what different breads we eat but what same heart and mind is among us. Today, if we are really focused, we will be in full accord and of one mind with all believers in Christ. Each week, before our time for the prayers of the people, we remember that we share in the joys and concerns of each other because we are a family in Christ. That’s easier to remember when we can see the faces of our family in the pews around us. Today, on World Communion Sunday, when we join in the litany prayer, remember those who gather singing praise to Christ in Africa and Korea and Scotland and Mexico, in homes and in fields and in huts and in cathedrals and in coffee shops, for if one suffers in these places, we all suffer together; if one raises a joy, all rejoice together.

Remember those for whom the peacemaking offering is more than a gesture: those for whom resources are needed to provide safe places for families, safe places for children, safe places for the elderly; those for whom violence keeps them up at night and keeps them fearful during the day; those who can name family and friends who have lost their lives because of violence. As Christians we are called to make peace where there is discord. The peacemaking offering is not just about the money raised, although money can and does help. Peace and communion are intricately and intimately linked. When we come to the communion table, no sacrifice is needed, for Christ made the ultimate sacrifice. Instead, when we come to the communion table, we offer ourselves. Jesus calls us to come forward as people of peace. In the gospel of Matthew, he says, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” What words to remember on a day on which we promise to further peace and on which we are conscientious to remember how connected we are.

What will your offering of peace be? On this communion Sunday, you may not be able to go out, make peace, and come back in time for communion. So, instead, make your vow to make peace, make your vow to improve a relationship. Before you take the bread, the symbol of Christ's body sacrificed for you and for me and for people we have never met and never will, think of a relationship which could use more peace. And, before you take the cup, the cup of the new covenant, a covenant which strips away the demand for physical sacrifices, make a promise to do your part to make peace in that relationship. Do so knowing that peace is not measured by the response you get or by change in another's behavior but by the change within you. All you can affect is the peace, or conversely the strife, you bring. Regardless of the other's behavior, the other's response, the other's receptivity, vow to offer peace.

We know the landowner in the parable from our reading in Matthew is God and what does God do? Despite the repeated bad, even murderous, behavior of the tenants, God continues to reach out and attempt to foster a good relationship. God goes so far as to send God's greatest emissary to try to repair the relationship that the tenants have broken by seeking stuff over God. They turned away from the greatest gift God offered. They made their own laws and chose them over God's laws, despite the reminder in the form of God's son.

Psalms 19 urges us not to forget God's guiding goodness; should we keep God's ways then we, like the psalmist, will be blameless and innocent of great transgression. The law of the Lord is perfect; the decrees of the Lord are sure; the precepts of the Lord are right; the commandment of the Lord is clear; the fear of the Lord is pure; the ordinances of the Lord are true. God's desires for us are so obvious, even creation, which cannot speak, spells it out. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." It does not matter what language you speak, what time it is where you are now, whether you are surrounded by plains or mountains or savannas or rain forest - God's greatness, given to us through the gifts of creation all around us and through God's son, is evident in ways that can be plainly understood.

When you behold trees ablaze with autumnal color, what do you learn? In a golden field? In an azure sky? In steely clouds? In verdant hills? While watching a fellow child of God receive the bread of life? While watching a child sing to the glory of God? When waves capped with foam crash around you, what do you understand? In the bleat of animals? In gusts of wind? In the crack of lightning or the boom of thunder? In the voice of a spouse, of a child, of a friend, of another child of God? In the lilt of a language you do not know? In the ancient Gloria Patri, sung across this land, across oceans, across

generations? In the Word proclaimed? The heavens are telling the glory of God, the heavens above Waukesha and Washington State and the West Bank. The earth proclaims God's handiwork, the earth under your feet and mine and under the feet of the child orphaned by AIDS and the men fighting for their countries and the women working in fields to feed their families. What do you hear? You are loved. You are God's. You are special. You are valued. So is the person with whom you will vow to offer peace. So is the person worshipping 4,000 miles away. Know that. Ponder that. And realize that someone 4,000 miles away has heard and understood the heavens and earth proclaim that **you** are God's good creation. Realize that the joys and concerns you carry in your heart are carried by another who you have not met. If one suffers, we suffer together and, if one rejoices, together we rejoice. Realize you are made to be in communion, in community, so bring what only you can bring - your offer of peace.

Let us pray: Holy God, the heavens are telling us of your great goodness. Open our ears and our eyes to receive their proclamation and open our hearts to your peace. Amen.