

“Death and Life”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: John 12:9-11, 20-26

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Shortly after today's sermon, we will join in our Affirmation of Faith, which I took from the PC(USA) Book of Order, the foundation of our denominations, Faith and Practices. Let's listen now to another part of the Book of Order, where it says “the Church is the body of Christ” (F-1.03): Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28).

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life. The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. ... The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation. ... The church lives in the present on the strength of the promise of a new creation out in our future. Can you see it? Maybe not. The present is not always an easy place to live.

Those participating in the New Beginnings process here at First Church know that. And likewise. None of us is surprised to learn that 80% of all mainline congregations are declining or stagnant when it comes to numbers; not always spiritually. Those who attended Dr. Stancil's 2015 lecture series know that as well. He reported on the future of religion in America today, pointing to the same 80% statistic.

And it's not just religion and church. Young people entering the workplace are coming out of school with student-loan debt today that their future job prospects won't cover. They, too, need the strength of that promise of new creation out in their future.

Same with parents and those dealing with childhood illnesses, overscheduled teenagers, and the current drug culture. They, too, need the strength of that promise of new creation out in the future. We all do, whenever we suffer a loss, get diagnosed with a disease, argue and fight with a spouse or a son or daughter; a brother or sister. The world is full of situations with no easy answers, no apparent solutions, no hope that something new can arise. And it feels like the world is out to get us!

Friends, it has been that way throughout human history. And the only place I know to turn for that promise of new creation is Jesus Christ. Thank God for Jesus Christ. Thank God for the words of Jesus Christ, when he said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” And when Jesus says glorified he means crucified and resurrected; death and life. “Very truly, I tell you,” says Jesus, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

In other words, those who are so attached to the status quo and not ruffling feathers loose out on the future God is preparing for them, and preparing them for. Living a fruitful life is not easy; it's hard. But it's also faithful. It's how we are called to live.

You can't be your child's best friend all the time and be an effective parent. You can't be so stressed by a diagnosis that your health suffers in spite of the treatment. "Those who love their life lose it;" those who cling to what is or was loose out on what could be, if only they had a little more faith in God, and in God's timing of things.

What we see in our scripture passage for today is a key step in Jesus growing the church and blessing the lives of those who are drawn to him. It starts by people being attracted to Jesus, and it ends with Jesus empowering us to help grow as his followers and welcome others to come alongside us.

No one comes to this church because of me – or anyone of us – or any one program or ministry we offer. People come to this church because of Jesus. They come here because of who they see us being and how they see us interacting. They see that it reflects a life of self-giving and higher calling, and so much so that they actually see and experience Jesus in us.

Of course, we're not always that way. Sometimes what people see in our actions is anything but Jesus. Sometimes, "being Jesus" runs up against who we'd rather be.

It's like the woman who was preparing pancakes for her two sons. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here she says, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" And with that, the older boy turned to his brother, Ryan, and said. "Ryan, you be Jesus!"¹ Sometimes, "being Jesus" runs up against who we'd rather be – the first one to get a pancake.

There are two types of people attracted to Jesus in today's reading. The first is "a crowd of Jews" who came not only because of Jesus but also because of Lazarus, who was brought back to life by Jesus. These are Jews, people who were part of the synagogue – part of the church – and they were attracted by the new thing they saw Jesus doing, raising someone from the dead, creating new life.

The second group of people attracted to Jesus that day were Greeks, those who were outside the synagogue, outside the church. As John remembers it, there were "among those who went up to worship at the festival ... some Greeks." This was a Jewish festival, what we might think of as a church potluck and worship service. What was it that attracted these outsiders? They tell us what attracted them when they come to the disciple Philip and say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

¹ Cited in Today's Christian Woman, November/December 1999, 24.

Everyone wants to see Jesus, both those in the church and those outside the church. And how does the church respond? When the first group, the Jews, goes outside the church – outside the synagogue – to see Jesus, John tells us that “the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well (as Jesus), since it was on account of (Lazarus) that many of the Jews were deserting (the synagogue) and were believing in Jesus.” Did you catch that? People leave the “House of God” to go see God incarnate out in the world and the religious leaders would rather kill God and God’s works than let them go.

What a shame for the synagogue – the church – to be so concerned about keeping people in the pews that they can’t support or even tolerate what Jesus is doing out in the world. It’s their way or the highway; there is no middle ground. But ***Jesus has a better way.***

Jesus hears about the Greeks who want to see him – those who are outside the church, who don’t go to the synagogue – he hears that they are being drawn to him and Jesus knows just how to meet them in their need. Jesus lives into the plans God has for him, even at the risk of his own life, laying down his life so that God can raise it back up.

And so it is with us. The way we meet anyone in their need to better know and experience Jesus does this by living into the plans God has for us, even at the risk of our own life. “Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body,” You, your gifts and talents, your financial resources, and the inspiration and discernment of the Holy Spirit in how to employ them. The Book of Order goes on to say... The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.”

Or as Jesus puts it, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies – (if it gives itself entirely into God’s hands) – it bears much fruit.”

Followers of Christ are called to be the body of Christ, which is the church – not the building, but the people. New Beginnings is all about getting outside of ourselves and connecting with the world around us in such a way that people see Jesus! “Whoever serves me,” says Jesus, “must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” Jesus went to the synagogue, sure. Jesus is here with us in church today, yes. This is where people are equipped and *inspired to be the church.*

But, Jesus didn’t stay in the synagogue; the church can’t be contained in the walls of this building. The church has to be in your heart, it has to be taken out into the world. People need to see Jesus in you and in this world. People need to experience his attraction. People need to see us being the church and ask us – ask you and me – why we do what we do. And we – we have to be bold to say that it is because of our faith that we do what we do. It is because of our church that we are who we are.

It is because of Jesus Christ that our young people can and should have confidence in the future, it’s because of Jesus that parents can be parents,

it's because of Jesus that people make the right choices, brave life-and-death illnesses, find gracious ways of responding to family and friends, even when it's not fair.

None of this is easy. It feels like part of us is dying, when we get so outside of ourselves in our faith. We don't know what the future holds from one moment to the next. And that's OK, as long as we know Jesus, as long as we place our future in God's hands.

As the church, we are called to share Jesus with others, to tell people about who Jesus is in our lives, and to show them who we are in Christ. If we do that, then we have the promise of a bright future, a fruitful ministry, a rewarding spiritual life, a new creation.

As we heard at the beginning of this sermon, "The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. ... The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation. ..."

If what you are going through in life right now is not working for you, you have in Jesus Christ the promise of new creation. Let your old ways fall to the side and trust God to raise up in their place new ways of being, new ways of being that bear much fruit. "Whoever serves me," says Jesus, "the Father will honor." Let us all go from this place in service to Christ confident that God will raise us up to be a blessing in this world, a pathway to Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the splendor of your eternal light coming into our world in Jesus. Thank you for making yourself known to us in Christ, and for calling us to be the body of Christ, to make Christ known to those in our lives.

In the kindness and faithfulness of Jesus, we have seen the kindness and faithfulness of you, O God.

May our lives reflect the light of Jesus so much that we ourselves are changed into his likeness, shining forth his light.

We pray your loving and healing presence on all those who are in need, whether in mind, body or soul.

We pray, too, for our church – for this church – that those who know and experience us might know and experience you in who we are being and what we are doing.

For it was you who taught us to be a light shining in a world of darkness, just as you taught us to be a people of prayer, even giving to us the greatest of prayers, the Lord's Prayer, which we bring before you now saying 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.**