

Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, Alive
A sermon preached on June 24, 2018 @ FPC Muscatine
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Our second scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of Habakkuk, chapter 2, verses 2-3. It can be found beginning on page 821 of the Old Testament in your pew Bibles if you would like to follow along. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

²Then the Lord answered me and said:

Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets,

so that a runner may read it.

³For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.

The word of God for you, the people of God. Let us pray. *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, for you alone are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Prayerful, courageous, united, serving, alive.

This past week was the 223rd General Assembly of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), where hundreds of our Presbyterian sisters and brothers, young and old, came together in St. Louis, home to a gigantic arch and some baseball playing birds, to cast a vision for our denomination for the next two years. Hundreds of actions were taken. Controversial issues were addressed. Old friends reconnected with one another and new friendships were made.

I had the privilege of going down to GA for a couple days last weekend. If you haven't had the privilege to attend a General Assembly, I highly recommend that you do. They take place every 2 years. It is great to see what our denomination is up to and to meet other Presbyterians from outside our local contexts. Throughout my experience there and after reading about things that happened at GA and watching the live-stream after I left as well as reflecting on

the things that I have seen or learned about in my time here at First Muscatine so far, five words come to mind.

Prayerful, courageous, united, serving, alive.

I cannot take credit for these five words. These five words come from the 2020 Vision Team, a team that was mandated by the 222nd General Assembly that met in 2016 and charged with “developing a guiding statement for the denomination as it moves into the future.”

This past week, the 2020 Vision Team presented their draft guiding statement, a living document that will continue to be shaped and changed over the course of the next two years. They spent the past two years reflecting on Scripture, including the texts that we read this morning, foundational documents from the denomination, reports from previous General Assemblies, listening sessions across the nation and denomination, the team’s own ideas and above all the Holy Spirit.

The draft guiding statement is centered around five words. Five words that define who we are as Presbyterians in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Five words that define who we are called to be. Five words that define who we strive to be.

Prayerful, courageous, united, serving, alive.

Prayerful. If you asked me which one of these five words describe us the best, I would probably say prayerful. We pray a lot. Our worship services are filled with prayer of various sorts. In the prayer of confession, we confess our sin before God and to one another, accepting our responsibility for the brokenness in the world and in ourselves. Yet, in Christ, we are assured of forgiveness and are given the freedom to forgive others. We ask the Holy Spirit to direct and guide us as we actively listen to Scripture and fully engage in the joys and challenges of life in this present world. We pray for each other. Every week, we lift up by name all those who are in need of our prayers. We pray for the offerings that we collect and bring forward. We pray through our singing. Finally, as the draft statement reads, *“In Christ we are bound together by grace, cleansed in the waters of baptism, nourished at the Lord’s table, and sent out to share the Good News.”*

It is not just in our worship that shows that we are a prayerful people. Every time there is a committee meeting, we begin and end with prayer. Our deacons send prayer cards to people on our prayer list, letting them know that we are praying for them. This past week, Pam led some in prayer for world refugee day. My friends, God calls us to be prayerful.

Courageous. “Reformed and always being reformed, we follow the Holy Spirit in new and imaginative ways to places we have not yet been. We foster the hope of reconciliation in Christ that brings healing to individuals and communities, which transforms the world. We work for God’s justice and peace for all people in every land, prioritizing the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the abused.”

Throughout this past week at GA and in reflecting about the people of this church, we are indeed courageous. One example from this past week. On a hot and humid Tuesday afternoon at General Assembly, hundreds of our Presbyterian sisters and brothers, led by the co-moderators and stated clerk, marched from the St. Louis convention center to the city jail with over \$47,000 to participate in a “bail out.” The funds were used to provide bail for persons held for minor offenses and who had been prescreened for release. It took courage for our sisters and brothers to take part in that march.

We are also courageous here at First Muscatine. It took courage when Emmaus Café was started. You identified a need in the community and you acted on it. When CORE was around, it took courage to let go, to give up what we know. It took courage to shift to a “just say yes” mentality when I and I was first introduced. It took courage to commit to staying in this building even though there have been times where some have wondered if we should go somewhere else or build another building. It is courageous for us to go to places we have not been, to go on mission trips to Haiti or to all the places the youth have gone, in order to work for God’s justice and peace for all people in every land. My friends, we are called to be and we are courageous.

United. The guiding statement has these words for united: *“As members of the Church universal, we are Christ’s disciples, called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Against forces that seek to divide, Christ compels us to bear witness to a love that sustains community across great differences. Striving to love all our neighbors as ourselves, we approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as we follow Jesus Christ in respecting the freedom of other religions, worldviews, and traditions.”*

As a local congregation, I have seen how united we are. After the tornado hit, this church came together, with everyone pitching in to clean up. We are united in the sense that though we each have different gifts, we are all one body. We are united in that everyone helps out and volunteers for the church; it is not always the same 5 people. You demonstrated how united we are when you all came together to clean the sanctuary prior to Harriet Dindinger's memorial service. Even though many of us differ greatly in our political and/or theological views we are still one body. We are a united group of sisters and brothers here in Muscatine.

However, as I reflect on the events of General Assembly this past week and the state of our denomination, I confess that we as a denomination are not as united as we could be. I lament at conflict between presbyteries and synods. I lament at the systemic issues that have been plaguing our denominational leadership in Louisville, where our denomination is headquartered. I lament at how divided our denomination seems to be when it comes to issues such as fossil-fuel divestment or the per-capita budget. I saw issues being debated that at the end of the day probably didn't need to be debated on. Yet I could see that we as a denomination strive to be united. One example of how our church was united this past week was one I used earlier when our sisters and brothers marched to the jail to "end cash bail" and bail out those unfairly imprisoned. Our denomination has work to do to fully embody what is meant by the word united, yet there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Serving. "As followers of Jesus Christ, the one who washed his disciples' feet, we listen to and serve our neighbors. We partner with others to become God's hands and feet in the world, showing both compassion and generosity to all of creation. We venture beyond the familiar, meeting people where they are as we share Christ's transformative love."

My friends we do serving well. Be proud of yourselves for that. Every Sunday we serve our neighbors at Emmaus Café. A couple of weeks ago, our youth held their first, hopefully annual, Muskie Missions weekend where they served the community by doing things like hosting a kids club, picking up trash by the river, or packing meals for those in need. Every year, we participate in Operation Christmas Child, filling shoeboxes to go to children in need of supplies. We venture beyond the familiar when we go to places like Haiti or Brazil. For those who have helped the people at MCSA, you have met them

where they are, not where they were or where they could be, but where they are now.

Moving outside of this church and if we look at our denomination, there are organizations such as Presbyterian Disaster Assistance who send teams out to serve brothers and sisters in Christ, helping them out in times of need after a natural disaster. World Mission, an office of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, has missionaries all around the world venturing beyond the familiar, showing Christ's love to people where they are. The Young Adult Volunteer program sends out young adults to go and do mission all around the world, to places such as New Orleans, South Korea, Scotland, Africa, and elsewhere. Finally, there is the Hands and Feet initiative, a new initiative brought forward by our stated clerk to highlight and strengthen local and national efforts by the Presbyterian Church (USA) to facilitate change and communicate God's love. My friends, Presbyterians are a serving people.

This brings us to the final word. Alive. God calls us to be alive. As the statement reads: *"We are a people of the resurrection: though death surrounds us, we are not afraid because we follow the One who was raised from the tomb. The Holy Spirit gives us courage to build a community that reflects the fullness of God's image in humanity: beautifully diverse and no longer divided by age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexuality, physical and mental ability, geography, or theological conviction. In the sure and certain hope of resurrection, we testify that the church and its members are called to follow Christ's model by risking all, even life itself, for the sake of the Gospel."*

Friends, our church, our denomination is alive. Our denomination has become one of the most welcoming, one of the most inclusive denominations in Christian circles. Our co-moderators are two women of different ethnicities from completely different backgrounds. Our former co-moderators were two women of different ethnicities. Our stated clerk and the newly installed director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency are both African American. A young person felt so loved and welcomed by his denomination and by his church that he felt comfortable to come out as bi on the floor of General Assembly and after having done so was embraced by many of the young adults and the co-moderators. We are also a people of the resurrection. Though we face declining numbers, both in membership and in income, we as Presbyterians are not afraid for the future, because as the statement reads, *"we follow the One who was raised from the tomb."*

My friends the church is alive even here in Muscatine. 8 months ago, we celebrated 175 years of being alive as a congregation. We are alive through our music, from David on the organ, to our choir and our praise team, to all those who have participated in the music programs of this church. With Emmaus Café, we have built a community that most certainly reflects the fullness of God's image in humanity. There's the Wednesday morning coffee group who have been meeting for years. There have been adult studies about a plethora of subjects. We just created the pray ground, demonstrating that we value children in worship and welcome their participation. We wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for all the potlucks that we've had because we clearly know that we wouldn't be Presbyterian if we didn't have good food. All in all, we are alive. Be proud of that.

On the front of your bulletins, you will see the cross of our denomination. While I was at GA, I had lunch with a good friend who is a member of that 2020 Vision Team that I spoke of. In our conversation we talked about how these five words show up in the various hidden symbols in the cross. Prayerful is represented through the Bible or the baptismal font. Courageous is represented through both the dove or the fire. United is represented through the entire cross. Serving is represented through the robe. And finally, alive is represented through the blazing flames of fire.

My friends, as you go out into the world this day remember these five words. Remember what God calls us to be. Though we may not always be good in being those things, we continue to strive to be. However, sisters and brothers of First Presbyterian Church in Muscatine, IA, in my honest opinion, you embody these five words. You are indeed prayerful, courageous, united, serving, and alive. So, if you are ever asked by a friend to describe being Presbyterian as part of the PCUSA, you can use these five words as a way to tell them about who we are as Presbyterians.

And so, God calls us, the Presbyterian Church (USA), to be Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, Alive.

By the way, did you catch that those five words spell out PCUSA?

Amen.

Before we sing our next hymn, I want to just make a brief announcement. I recognize that I referred to or alluded to a number of specific examples of things that happened this past week at General Assembly. If you would like more details or clarifications, feel free to seek me out after church or throughout the week. Or you can go online to pres-outlook.org. Let us now stand and sing together hymn #305, “Come Sing, O Church, in Joy.”