

“The Fullness of God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 17, 2022

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 19:1-4, 7-10
Colossians 1:15-28

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God’s reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God’s message of reconciliation and shares God’s labor of healing the enmities which separate people from God and each other.¹

This is the way our denomination’s Book of Confessions describes the mission of the church: to be God’s one, universal community of reconciliation. Each congregation – large or small, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox or independent – is therefore a local, mission outpost; all entrusted with this same message of reconciliation, seeking to bridge across all that divides us from God and one another.

The letter to the Colossians was addressed to one of these early local, mission outposts. In the opening verses of its first chapter, the authors offered a greeting and lengthy prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of their faithfulness to the church’s mission. The good fruit being borne was allowing their understanding of God to continue to grow.

Today’s reading opens with a hymn of praise: one that, likely, was would have been in baptismal celebrations and inserted here to praise Christ as source and salvation of all things: “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Jesus is not merely the likeness or copy of God, but the projection of the divine on the canvas of our humanity; the embodiment of God in and for the world. If Christ is the image of the invisible God, the universe itself bears the image of Christ; even if it has not always lived the part.²

Because Christ was before all things and all things hold together through him, he is also the head of the church. And not just one part of the church, but the entire body universal, expressed in multiple places and ways. The church is the name for what Christ created at his resurrection; it is wherever God’s goodness comes to rule. Inspired by Paul’s image of the church as a body, the authors describe Christ’s influence over all parts, all members of the church. The ultimate dream and conviction is that one day, this body will come to include everything in unity.

¹ “The Confession of 1967 (Inclusive Language Text), *The Book of Confessions, PCUSA*

² Ryan Schellenberg from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Then – again addressing the readers, in verse 21 – the focus turns to reconciliation. Those who were estranged from God and others, trapped in hostile ways, doing harmful things to each other had not previously been reconciled in Christ. His own fleshly body – crucified and then risen again to new life – allows us to become new creations. This is the good news we have heard and are now called to proclaim: the faithfulness that is born out in good fruit.

Through Christ, we are reconciled to God; and, therefore, we strive to become reconciled to each other. This mission of the church is described – in our final verse, today – as becoming “mature in Christ.”

Later this year, the local mission outpost called Valley Presbyterian will celebrate sixty-five years. Since being organized and chartered in 1957, a lot of changes have certainly taken place. Many of you, I’m sure, remember stories about those earliest worship services on the second floor of the barn; long before Route 306 was paved or Highway 422 extended. Since those days, there have been many re-creations: multiple building campaigns; members and programs that have come and gone; chapel services and rib roasts; mission trips and summer musicals.

For the Apostle Paul, maturation was an apt descriptor for growing as new creations in Christ more into the fullness of God. To the Corinthians, he famously said, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” (I Cor. 13:11) Maturing – for individuals and congregations – means growing in your understanding of who God has created and called you to be.

Through all its highs and lows, Valley has matured to now be sixty-five years old. In our culture, we think of that particular age as a time of transition from one stage of life to another; an end to some things and a new beginning for others; and often, a time to assess and re-focus. For individuals – as well as for congregations – the timeline for these transitions might occur sooner or later, but no-one escapes them. As we mature, our energies, perspectives, and priorities change. We may long to be some different age; we might choose to get a facelift or dye our hair – and it might make us act or feel differently about ourselves – but it doesn’t change our age.

With maturity, we are given the opportunity to better understand who we are and what we are to do. As we grow older, rather than seeking just to be more comfortable, insulated, or safe; we can, instead, more fully appreciate our estrangements from God and each other; and seek to be reconciled. This is true both for individuals and congregations. Rather than mold the church in our own image, we can look to Christ as the projection of God’s fullness and head of the church, the body of Christ re-created.

David Ng – the prescient teacher of Christian education and youth ministry – sought to remind the church of its central purpose and mission. Concerned that the church had become distracted from its primary task of proclaiming Christ, he wrote that the church is not meant to be a place of *entertainment* where attendees, especially young people, turn into spectators while the leaders “put on a show,” using whatever gimmicks and novelties they can pull out of bag of tricks so that everyone has fun. The church, he said, is not some theological theme park where frantic leaders – fearful or boring their customers – employ an ever-escalating array of techniques.

Ng also wrote that the purpose of the church is not *maintenance* – to be a safe sanctuary for members until Christ comes again. The key purpose of this kind of church is to maintain the status quo. Abhorring disruption, change or growth, this church focuses on itself by keeping its members comfortable without challenges; merely trying to survive.

Furthermore, Ng wrote, the central purpose of the church is not *fellowship* – where the entire energy of the congregation is focused on social relationships. Certainly, he says, this is an important dimension of church, but can easily transform congregations into organizations that exist for their own members, rather than for the worship of God as the body of Christ. These churches tend to be insular – if not exclusive – and focus on one’s comfort within the group, rather than whether one is living one’s life faithfully.

Finally, Ng also wrote that the purpose of the church is not *protection* – where the community, terrified of the world beyond its walls, invests all its energies in constructing a safe place where its members can dutifully worship, study, and enact their sacred rituals. These congregations ultimately forbid any meaningful interaction with outsiders, until – at least – the strangers have been duly tested and assimilated.

For Ng, the real purpose of the church is clear – to be a community of Christ’s disciples and, as such, to proclaim Christ’s message of reconciliation. We do not proclaim entertainment or maintenance or fellowship or protection. The church of Jesus Christ does not exist for us and our comfort. It exists to proclaim Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” (v. 15)³

As we mature – as our energies, perspectives, and priorities shift – sometimes we want or need to enjoy fellowship, to feel protected, and to be entertained. None of these – by themselves – are wrong. They can all be important aspects of church life.

But they are not the central purpose; they do not hold a position above the proclamation of Christ’s reconciliation to God and one another. For in Christ, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (v. 19)

³ Roger Niskioka (referencing *Youth in the Community of Disciples* by David Ng) in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 3

As one poet writes:

the fullness of God
pleases to dwell
wherever it alights
from thence
it brings forth
an olive branch

the fullness of God
touches everything
from chaos
to this ego
birthing Christ
and myself

the fullness of God
imparts fullness
develops wholeness
urges maturity
until all is known
beyond all that's unknown.⁴

We are the body of Christ; with Jesus as its head. Each of us – in this local, mission outpost and in others of many varieties throughout the world – have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, participating in God's plan to mend the tears and bridge the lines of division in the world around us. May we continue to grow more mature in our understanding of the fullness of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ. And let us always maintain, as our first priority, the proclamation of Christ's reconciling love for us and all people. Amen.

⁴ Wesley White from "Kairos CoMotion"