

Sermon Title: Made Alive Together

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

In the Ozarks of Arkansas, there is a place familiar to boys and girls called the “Duck’s Nest Hole.” It is not necessarily a specific place, but a virtual place, a place inside the imagination, but nonetheless real. It is real because many of those growing up in the Ozarks have memories of such a place. “Duck’s Nest is a hole of water down at the creek where swift waters swirl around smooth flat stones, like a duck’s nest. Mysterious, churned white foam lines the nest. In this place, you may safely wade and play. There is a saying in the neighborhood, “if you wash your hands in the foam and speak the words: “Sunny, sunny bubbles, wash away my troubles.” Every trouble will vanish, washed away on the magic spell of running water.

There is a Hebrew word in the First Testament which means both “to be safe” and “to feel safe,” (Isa. 14:30 *betach*), echoing the memory of “Duck’s Nest.” One of these meanings is not enough; we need both at the same time. Our WOCC policy on children is one way, a very important way, in which we help implement this in our congregation. Another way is our public declaration that we are “Open” and “Inclusive,” no less important. When we welcome the stranger, which literally means one who shrinks back, we spiritually lift them up out of their fear into safety, what the Psalms call a wide place, a safe space, in which they can relax and breathe freely. When we provide a radical welcome to our visitors on Sunday morning, or at other times during the week, we are also helping ourselves to find that special place where we can each “be heard,” and “be felt” before we speak, where both “host” and “guest,” (*hospes*) “self” and “stranger,” give birth to each other,” as Theologian Richard Kearney has written. Popular author, Cheryl Richardson writes: “People start to heal the moment they feel heard.” “To be safe,” and “to feel safe,” are important elements of who we are, what it means to be “life-giving,” which is one of our core values at WOCC.

When I was growing up in Oklahoma, we sang a lively camp song entitled “To Be Alive.” The words went like this:

Song written by Ray Repp: “Every day there’s a newness, something else to do. The dawn of life is upon us. So, let the gladness ring through. Wake up to a new sunshine. Darkness no longer stays. A new generation will light the world today. Tell the whole population, the time has now arrived to be alive. Ring the bell of new freedom, teach [others] to live. ... the real joy of living is something we can now give.”

Chorus: “To be alive and feeling free, and to have everyone in our family, to be alive, in every way. Oh, how great it is to be alive.”

One of the early church fathers, Athanasius (296-373 CE) by name, declared: “[God] became what we are so that we might be made into what God is.” It is a foundational wish for the

ancients that we might be made alive together in Christ Jesus. “The glory of God, says Irenaeus, is [human beings] fully alive! If we can only “widen our hearts,” as Paul says, we might gain a better view of the whole, of God’s design for us, the good works God has planned for us to do. Mother Teresa challenges us to a type of “prayer [that] enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of [Godself].”

One image I found on the internet, is a light bulb with a saltshaker on the end where the plug should be. “Taste the salt and Be the Light,” it declares. To be fully alive is to be salted and lit [like a lamp for the world to see. Let a redeemed people say so! We are life-giving, life-affirming! A “salted covenant,” says Leviticus, is a forever covenant. In accordance, a pact of friendship in the ancient world was one seasoned by salted food eaten together. And so, too, the prophet Elisha uses salt to “sweeten” and “heal” the brackish waters of the Jericho Spring (2 Kings 2:19-22). Living water! Living bread! Fully alive! Inhale Torah, Eat the Scroll, Taste the Gospel! In Christ we are all made alive through the forgiveness of a salted covenant, a new covenant, where the Law is written on the heart instead of stone, where the spirit of the law is more important than the letter.

In the First Testament, the frequent spiritual warning is: “Harden NOT your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah, in the wilderness. Meribah and Massah are wilderness place names, symbolizing a place of rebellion and quarreling, a place where they tested the Lord by demanding water in the desert, a place where the wandering people cried out: “Is the Lord among us, or not?” Many wanted to go back into slavery in Egypt, give up their newly found freedom, their new identity as a people of God, and, so, they threatened to stone their leader Moses, as one without credibility. These were places where relationships among the people, and with God, were literally “made bitter.” And so, Moses touches the rock of Horeb with his rod, to cleave it and release its waters for the people to drink. In Psalm 78, we find the song of praise and thanksgiving for this event: “God gave them to drink abundantly as out of the great deep, bringing streams out of the rock, causing the waters to run down like rivers.” Paul calls this miracle, the miracle of the Supernatural Rock, and he even identifies this rock as Christ. Yet, there is a negative translation of this Exodus 17 miracle that is sometimes missed: that when Moses touches the rock, cleaves the rock with his rod, water comes gushing out, only not clear, sweet, water, but a “gushing of embittered water.” God providing for their needs in a way that expresses disappointment. Like the manna-miracle, the people are invited to accept a miracle that is not what they wanted or expected, to train their eyes to look for help in unexpected places.

Embittered water will sustain our lives, but sweet water will provide a spirit from which we can improve our lives and repair our relationships. Jesus invites us to drink of the sweet water, to step beyond the security of dark places into the light of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. John of Patmos describes the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, with the Tree of Life straddling the River of Life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit

every month, the leaves of the tree provide healing for the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). The fountain of living water sustains the peace of the living God and the living Christ. When Jesus encounters the woman at the well (*phrear*), there is a similar understanding. The well at which Jesus speaks to the woman is called a “phrear,” or a hole in the ground for holding water. But Jesus speaks to the woman of a different type of well, “a pege,” which means a well over a gushing spring of sweet water that continues to provide water and never runs out.

‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ (John 4:7-11) John of Patmos, give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

The Siloam Pool was known to contain fresh waters from the ancient Spring of Gihon, waters that the prophet Isaiah called “the waters of Shiloah that flow gently.” (Isa. 8:6). “They flow gently and sweep over Judah as a flood, pouring over it and filling the breadth of the land, a symbol of Immanuel, God with us.” And they flow gently, as the Savior is gentle and kind and meek; they are different from the mighty Tigris River which are turbulent and reflect the pomp and power of the world’s forces. The gate on the south side of the Temple led to a public square where Ezra read the scriptures beside the living waters of Shiloah, also where the priests might clean themselves before performing their duties. According to the Jewish Mishnah (Sukkah 4:9-10), these waters were carried into the Temple during the Festival of Tabernacles for a pouring ritual to symbolize the coming rains.

As our General Minister and President, Terry Hord Owens put it this past week, during her weekly Zoom prayer meeting, “we offer life, not condemnation; The Jesus Way is the Way of Love. We are called to be different!” Two of the seven words that Jesus speaks on the cross, are the words: “I thirst.” Mother Teresa explains these words spiritually:

“The Lord is thirsty for our love, for our heart. He wants to give himself to us. And through us, he wishes to give his love to others.”

And it is not just living water, as important as that is, but also living bread, living loaves made from the one loaf (1 Cor. 10:17) which we share. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” (John 6:51)

Our Disciple ancestors left us with a phrase that we struggle to remember on special occasions like baptism. They called these special occasions “Living Oracles.” These were intended to be sermons without words; the living Oracles were “acted parables.” (*λογια ζωντα* Acts 7:38, Jer 28:10), the embodiments of the gospel in the midst of the worshipping community. This community is itself alive, consisting of “living stones built into a spiritual house.” (1 Peter 2:5) The whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple ... in whom you and I are

also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Eph. 2:25). A living, growing organism we are! (As Yoda might say.) If we attach our lives to Christ, we dwell in Christ’s love and we dwell in the values of God, mercy and compassion. Theologically speaking, Jesus is born out of the House of Bread (Bet-lechem), with a genealogy of bread-providers stretching back to the ancient past. But Jesus did not consider himself merely a bread-provider, but something more, a “living bread,” soul-bread, spirit-bread, that gives life of a kind we have never known before, the kind of food which feeds us forever, and not for just a day.

In Psalm 74:19 as King David compares himself to a “turtle dove,” as a sacrifice to God to restore the wholeness of the people. David writes: “Deliver the soul of your turtle-dove, and do not forget the life of your poor.” The reason we do not forget the stranger, according to the First Testament, is that we too once were strangers in Egypt, strangers in a strange land. We too were ones who, as the Hebrew word “foreigner” or “stranger” suggests, ones who “shrink back or to the side of the road or out of sight.” (Lev. 19:34; Ex 22:21) And this implies, I think, that the reason we do not forget the poor is that we too once were poor, or if we were not, we might become poor, God forbid, through circumstances beyond our control. Perhaps we have heard the words: “There go I, but for the grace of God.” Do not forget the widow, the orphan, the poor. For you also might find yourself there one day.

Yes, Love sees and knows the other, the one loved, the one in need: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17).

Rev. James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York, once put it this way: “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” These are strong preaching words for any preacher to preach; but the truth is that people are not just poor, but they are “made poor” by economic forces beyond their control. The forces of globalization have led us to a point in our planet’s history where rich countries exploit poor countries, making the poor even poorer and the rich even richer, causing many economic refugees to migrate for survival across many different boundaries throughout the world, through airports, across oceans as well as borders. But there is more to the truth than this. We are ones “made alive together” in Christ Jesus. We are made alive through the power of the Spirit, where MY grace is not complete without YOUR grace.

In our scripture today, the author is writing to those in the congregation in Ephesus, who would hear this letter read to them, knowing that they are the ones being addressed. But it is not surprising that other congregations, both of that time and our own time, might overhear this letter, including ourselves. Some letters circulated with a fill-in-the-blank target for the letter.

“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love by which [God] loves us, has raised us up together with Christ Jesus, yes, by means of Christ Jesus, and even more, God has seated us together beside Christ Jesus in the heavenly places.”

Note that we hear present tense in these passages; the voice is active. It is currently true, not just something that will happen in the future. Now, some translations attempt to thwart the present tense of this statement, by changing the wording to read “God has given us a place beside Christ” or “God has enthroned us with him in the heavenly realms.” These translations emphasize too strongly that we are not in the heavenly realms yet. They want to leave us with the feeling of “not yet.” But, the present tense, the active voice, of this scriptural language is unmistakable. It is not that we will ONLY be fully alive tomorrow; it is that we are fully alive today and that influences our tomorrow.

Even more significant is that the target of the verbs is plural. In English, we tend to assume that the word “us” applies in the sense of “each of us,” rather than “all of us.” But the Greek language leaves no mistake that the target is “all of us” together. And the English translation is “us” rather than a singular “you.” It is plural. “We have been raised together, all of us, with Christ Jesus, “we have been seated together in Christ Jesus.” “We were dead through trespasses and sins in which we once walked around and conducted ourselves.” We were like the walking dead; we lacked life; we were frozen in your powerlessness. We were unresponsive to the opportunities to live. We were dead in our lapses as well as in our deeds, in what we did without intention, as well as what we did intentionally. We were like those “swollen in anger” [from previous injustice]. We were dead in your falling away from truth as well as in our walking away from truth. We were dead, yet now we are alive! “The spirit [God’s Spirit] is at work in [all of] us.” We are called out to be part of a new reconciling Spirit that allows people to change from who they were in the past, not holding them to who they were. We were dead. Dead I say. We were dead through our sins, but now, now, we are alive together. **God has made us alive**, made us to live again and breathe again from the rare and beautiful air of his Spirit. Dead, no longer. Alive. Alive! Do you feel it? No longer frozen. Alive and kicking. Alive and well. Alive and breathing. Alive and responding. Alive together. We are to invite all others to join us.

“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. (1 John 3:14)”

The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, reminds us that our salvation may be named “Theodora,” or God’s gift, and that each of us may carry the name of “Dorothea,” the gift of God. God’s gift of life links us, to Christ and to one another. During Lent, we are invited to a “hopeful boldness,” to encounter the mystery of God in a dangerous hope that extends beyond our comfort zones, a mystery that reveals even new mysteries day by day as we learn what it means to be more human and alive than we have ever been before. Amen.