

Called to be a Covenant Community

Our first reading comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, chapter 8, verses 18 through 30, which can be found on page 158 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. Romans, chapter 8, beginning with the 18th verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Romans 8:18–30 (NRSV)

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs

too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

“Called to be a Covenant Community”

Our second reading comes from Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 12, verses 4 through 27, which can be found on page 174 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, beginning with the 4th verse. Listen for God’s word to you.

1 Corinthians 12:4–27 (NRSV)

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks,

slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ 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.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice

together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

Why are we here?

Why do we gather together on Sunday mornings with these people and in this space?

There are many good ways we can answer this question, and for each of us, the answer might be a little bit different, particularly when we consider our motivations for being here. But if we go below the surface, I hope that we can all recognize that at the core of it all is a calling from God.

God calls us here. God draws us here. God wants us to be here.

In some mysterious way, which we might call a movement of the Spirit, God draws us to this place to be with these people.

Look around you. Look at the people who are a part of this covenant community. I don't believe that it's an accident that any of us are here.

God has plans for us; for each of us.

And God has plans for us, together, as a group; good plans.

That verse from Jeremiah 29:11 comes to mind: "For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (NIV)

That's the God who gathers us; the god who calls and invites us to be a part of **this** community; a God who is for us and not against us; a God who claims us despite our faults and failures and welcomes us into his presence; a God who desires to bless us so that we might be a blessing for others.

We gather here on Sunday mornings to be with this God, to worship this God, to talk and sing and listen and learn. And in the process of all of this, it is our hope that God and God's Spirit will be at work, in and around and among us, to help us change and grow and develop into the kind of people that bring honor and glory to God; the kind of people who

embody God's character in the world; a living reflection of the God who is love. When we gather each Sunday, we are re-committing, re-dedicating our lives to God and God's service and we're inviting God to bring wholeness and healing into our lives, both individually and communally.

Here's an important question for us: What is the goal of God—what is God's intention—when it comes to God's creation? Does God want to destroy it all or to redeem it all? Destruction or redemption?

Redemption! God wants transformation. God wants to make this world like new; good and wholesome, life-giving and new.

And so, if that's the case, then it's fairly obvious what God wants for us as individuals? God wants redemption! Life-giving redemption and transformation! God wants to make us new and whole and good.

The apostle Paul said it in Romans 8: God wants us to be conformed to the image of his son. God's ultimate intention isn't just to save us from our sin, but to save us in order that we can become like Christ in terms of our behavior and character. God's intention is that we would live and

look like Christ and hear God's call to make our own unique contribution to the healing of a broken world.

And as James Harnish says in his book, *Make a Difference*, "Growing into the likeness of Christ means being drawn more deeply into the compassion of God so that we hear the cries of injustice in our world, see the broken people along the way, and seek with a divine urgency a way to make a difference in places of suffering, injustice, and pain." It is "not simply about our lives being shaped into the image of Christ, but about the way God can use our lives as a living witness to the Kingdom of God, present though not yet fulfilled among us."

And that's not only true for us as individuals, but that's also true for us as a church, as a covenant community. God wants *us* to become a community that is the spitting image of God; a community of conformity, where all people are being transformed into the image of Christ; a community of faith, and hope, and love, and witness; a community on a mission to make a difference.

When this happens, we believe that other people (through us) will encounter the God who is love who has come into the world. We believe

that God will use us to reach other people with the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ. One of our purposes is to welcome people in the name of God, to help them to know God and love God and grow in faith, and to help them become Godly people; to help them learn to take on the very character of God.

When people look at us, what do they see? Do they see us at our best? Do they see an example of God's kingdom here on earth?

Or do they see us at our worst? Do they see a group of people that bicker? Do they see a group of people who are petty and hold grudges? People who bad mouth one another? Or selfish people who love to complain about not getting the things they want? Or power-hungry people who want to be in control?

That's not who we are. And that's not who we are called to be. God has different plans for us.

And that's why it is so important that we come together regularly. And that's why it is so important that we open ourselves up to God and one another and give one another permission to see and name the places

where God might be at work in our lives; to help us hear more clearly God's calling, and to help us become better people; to help us change. When we are able to do this as a church, we will become the life-transforming community God calls us to be.

When you stop and think about it, membership in the church is very different from just about any other kind of membership we might know. It's not like being a member of a gym where we pay our dues in order to use the equipment to improve our bodies. And it's not like being a member of a country-club where we pay our dues and get our perks.

Being a member of the church is about recognizing to whom we belong. It's about answering God's call to gather together in community and use the gifts that God has given us for the greater good. It's about using our time and our talents to serve and build up others.

There might be days when we don't feel like coming to church. There might be days when we aren't sure if we've gotten anything out of it. And if that is our expectation, then perhaps we have misunderstood what Jesus was all about. As followers of Christ, and imitators of Christ, we come not to be served, but to serve. We come to give our devotion and

praise and attention to God. We come to share our lives and gifts and skills and love and compassion with God's people. When the church is at its best, the decision to come to church isn't a decision based on what we receive, but rather on what we give; on what we have to offer. When the church is at its best, all people come to give and share and encourage and build up one another because that is why God has gathered us together and given each of us gifts.

And so, on Sunday mornings, the question isn't: Should I go to church? The better question is: What will be missing because I am not there? Who is going to miss out on what I have to offer? Who is going to miss out on my smile, my words of encouragement, my listening heart, my love and compassion because I am not there? People need you. The church needs you. We all need each other. And that's why a strong sense of community is so important.

We come to church for the community, for others, to be for and with one another. When one member suffers, we all suffer with them. When one member is honored, we all rejoice with them. We all want to know that we are in this together; that we have each other's backs. "You are the body of Christ," Paul says, "and individually members of it." We've each

been given gifts, given to us by God, meant to be used in service to others, for the building up of the church, for making a difference in the world.

When people join the church, we ask them two questions. We ask:

- Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept Him as your Lord and Savior trusting in his grace and love?

That's the faith identity question. Then we ask:

- Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and mission through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? And everyone answers, "I will, with God's help."

That's the calling question. God call us to ministry in and for and with this covenant community.

Whenever someone is thinking of joining the church, we invite them to an "Exploring Church Membership" class. And we talk about this. And we give them this document the commitment we are making when we become a member of this church. It's a document called "Covenanting Together." And this is what it says:

COVENENTING TOGETHER

Rejoicing in my baptism and celebrating God's grace and gifts in my life, I resolve to minister within the community of this church as a servant of Jesus Christ as follows:

I will support the witness of this church by: aiming to live a godly life, striving to grow in my faith, seeking to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world, joining in worship regularly, and giving regularly.

I will serve the ministry of this church by: using my time and talents in joyful service to others, seeking to discover and nurture my gifts and talents, finding a ministry to be involved in, fulfilling the duties of my ministry to the best of my ability, and participating in training as I am given opportunity

I will share in the growth of this church by: warmly welcoming those who visit, praying for our community and our congregation—it's members, ministry, and staff, proclaiming the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ in word and deed, and inviting those without a church home into our ministry.

I will build-up the community of this church by: seeking to connect with others, acting in love toward others, holding others in high regard, working cooperatively with others, serving in partnership with others, and supporting and affirming the gifts and ministries of others.

If you notice something about this covenant, it's all about what we will do for God and for others and mentions nothing about what we would expect to receive in return. It's about our call from God to be other-centered and selfless.

Who are we and what are we looking for? What do we want at the deepest core of our being? I know what I want. And I'll bet you want it too. What we really want is to be loved just as we are and to become all we are meant to be. We want to belong to a community that welcomes us in all our painful brokenness and helps us to be healed and transformed into more than we ever imagined. We all want to be loved and transformed by love.

There is a great line from the movie, "As Good As It Gets" starring Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. If you've ever seen the movie, Jack Nicholson's character is a famous author who has OCD, Obsessive

Compulsive Disorder. He's not a very pleasant fellow. He sees a psychiatrist regularly and he struggles to function well in the outside world. But he gets to know Helen Hunt who serves as a waitress at the restaurant he frequents. And she makes a huge impact on him. She shows him patience and kindness and grace, when, quite frankly, he doesn't deserve it. He's a grumpy old curmudgeon who never has anything nice to say.

And that brings us to the best line of the movie. Jack is talking to Helen and he says, "I've got a really great compliment for you, and it's true." And she responds, "I'm so afraid you're about to say something awful." To which Jack says, "Don't be pessimistic, it's not your style." Then after hemming and hawing a bit, he says, "My doctor, a shrink that I used to go to all the time... he says that in 50 or 60% of the cases, a pill really helps. I 'hate' pills, very dangerous thing, pills. Hate. I'm using the word 'hate' here, about pills. Hate. My compliment is, that night when you came over and told me that you would never... all right, you were there, you know what you said. Well, my compliment to you is, the next morning, I started taking the pills."

And of course, she doesn't understand and she says: "I don't quite get how that's a compliment for me."

And Jack says, "You make me want to be a better man." That's the kind of community I hope that we can become; the kind of community that brings out the best in people and makes people want to be a better person.

I want to share with you one last story. And it also comes from a movie. "For Love of the Game" is a movie about an aging baseball player named Billy Chapel and he is pitching in Yankee Stadium in what could be the last game of his career.

Through flashbacks we see the events that led up to this moment. Jane, his on-again-off-again girlfriend, has broken up with him, punctuating her feelings by saying, "You don't need me. You and the ball and the diamond, you're perfect. . . . You can win or lose the game all by yourself." And she left him.

While the flashbacks tell us of his inner turmoil, in the middle of the baseball diamond, Billy Chapel is pitching a perfect game.

A perfect game is very rare. It is a game in which a pitcher records twenty-seven consecutive outs. Three batters each inning, three outs, nine innings. No one reaches a base.

Not one hit, not one walk, not one error. Perfect.

Even though he is forty years old, Billy Chapel is having a perfect game. But when he comes to the eighth inning, he says to his catcher, “I don’t know if I have anything left.” His catcher looks at him and says, “Chappy, you just throw whatever you got, whatever’s left. The boys are all here for you, we’ll back you up, we’ll be there. . . . We’re gonna be awesome for you right now. Just throw.”

As he starts the inning, he throws three straight balls.

One more, and he’ll walk the batter, ruining his perfect game.

In his mind’s eye he sees his father reminding him to be calm. He pitches a strike, and then the next ball is hit so hard it looks like a game-wrecking home run—only to be stolen away as one of the outfielders makes a spectacular leaping catch.

The catcher is right. The boys are there for him.

It takes the heroic defensive plays of his fielders behind him, of his teammates, to ultimately save the game for him—an unlikely grab by the catcher, a long throw from third, a diving stop at short. He even adds a prayer. And he gets the perfect game.

But Jane's words still haunt him, "You don't need me . . . you can win or lose the game all by yourself." At that moment, he realizes that he is not perfect alone. He needs the help of his teammates. He needs the memory of his father. He needs Jane's love. He even needs a little divine intervention. No one is perfect alone. We need one another. That is the church. That's who we are and who we are called to be for one another.

In the name of the father, and the son, and the holy spirit. Amen.