



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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On the Side of Redemption

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May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:11-14).

We all know that in some respects we're living today in challenging times.

For many people, these days are difficult because of some great loss or deep struggle they have to face as individuals: a struggle with illness or addiction or temptation, or the loss of a job or a relationship, or the death of someone dear to them. There are always some among us who are struggling while others are prospering, and many of us take turns being in one condition or the other. In the Christian community we call on resources of generosity and compassion to care for people when they need us, and then we draw upon the humility our faith provides to let us accept help from others when we are the ones who need their support.

At any given time some of us are struggling with all sorts of things individually, while in society and the world around us we face a number of serious challenges together.

Public discourse has grown rough and rancorous in America these days, as groups and parties pursue their self-interest above all else, to the neglect of others and the

detriment of the nation as a whole. Electoral boundaries are gerrymandered to maximize wins for the party that draws them, with the result that the most extreme voices have disproportionate influence, compromise becomes much more difficult, and people start to grow cynical about democracy itself.

We vote for politicians who tell us sweet little lies we like to hear, such as the one that claims all these tax cuts will pay for themselves, though four decades of recent experience prove that's almost never true. Now we've run up 22 trillion dollars of national debt to pass on to our grandchildren, and we'll pay roughly \$300 billion this year alone just to service the interest on that debt. Even worse than all this financial burden is that we're passing on to our children and grandchildren a culture that rationalizes self-centeredness in the name of some economic or political ideology.

Meanwhile, the long history of racism continues to haunt us in so many ways. We saw it again last week, when a couple of leaders from one party in a particular state were confronted with racist pictures from their past, and even members of the opposite party were reluctant to pounce, because they knew that their own past actions would keep them from being able to claim the moral high ground.

And women keep coming forth with allegations about men behaving badly, not just in distant decades before the women's movement but week after week, right here and now, in almost every sector of our society.

I could go on, but my point this morning is not to be depressing by reciting a list of awful things we already know.

My point is to ask what we as Christians are going to do about it.

Broadly speaking, we have three choices. We can be part of the problem, contributing in our own way to civil strife and tribal partisanship, economic irresponsibility and racial or sexual immorality. Or we can just wring our hands and fret over how bad things are, and not do anything to change them. Or we can try to understand what's happening and look for ways that each of us, with our own abilities and opportunities, might become part of the solution. We could, in other words, look for ways to be on the side of redemption.

You won't be surprised to hear me say that the third way, the way of seeking to be on the side of redemption, is the way of Jesus Christ, and therefore the only way to be faithful for those of us who call ourselves Christians.

What does it mean to be on the side of redemption? It means taking what we know about God's will, based on our understanding of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and applying that understanding towards healing and reconciliation and justice for all God's people. It means being instruments of God's redeeming love in this world. It means becoming part of the answer to the prayer we say together every Sunday: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It means living as though we really mean what we say and mean what we pray.

To be on the side of redemption is to ask, in every situation, what good might God want to bring out of this? To be on the side of redemption is to look, as Mr. Rogers encouraged children to look, for who the helpers are, and to

join the ranks of the helpers ourselves. To be on the side of redemption is to be among the eyes and ears and arms, the hearts and minds, God uses to accomplish God's own purposes in this world.

If we take our Christian vocation of discipleship seriously, several things will follow quite naturally.

First, we'll stop doing some things that don't help, or even make matters worse. We won't waste time despairing over the problems we see; that only wastes energy that could be put to better use in the service of solutions. We'll look critically at our other commitments and ask whether they truly serve the interests of all God's people or merely disguise our own self-interest with a thin pretense of public concern. We won't try to quarantine Christianity from the great problems of our day, as if Jesus had not called us to seek God's kingdom in every aspect of our lives.

Then, while we stop doing things that don't help, we'll actively enlist in God's service, so that the Holy Spirit can guide and strengthen us to do whatever God would have us do. We all have different gifts, but the essential thing is to make our gifts available to God, and watch for opportunities to put them to good use.

That means we'll come compassionately alongside those who suffer, and do what we can to change the conditions that cause them to suffer in the first place.

There is, for example, a great epidemic of drug addiction, including a massive opioid crisis, in our country, and it has been devastating even to some individuals and families in our own church and community. We need to be

present in love and support with those who suffer from addictions, either their own or in those they love, and we need to recognize that this is the kind of thing that can happen to anyone. We need to respond to individuals with compassion rather than judgment, while at the same time urging drug companies and medical professionals and public officials to do all they can to put an end to this terrible epidemic.

We need to keep practicing charity in both senses of that great word: charity as grace and forgiveness and mercy in our attitude toward others, and charity in the form of gifts to help people in need. We will always need the first kind of charity from one another, because we all make mistakes and sometimes we need to be treated more kindly than we deserve. And while we're practicing charity in the second sense of sharing our material gifts, we also need to be working for justice, so that fewer and fewer people will need that kind of charity. As we've said before, comfortable people may actually prefer charity to justice because charity is often cheaper than justice. But Jesus says that justice and mercy and faith go together; they're all aspects of the same devotion to God. So while we're responding to people in need, we must also do what we can to change the conditions that cause them to be needy.

We live in challenging times, but for our country and for the world in general, these are hardly the worst of times. For all the economic struggles people still face, this is not the Great Depression, and far fewer people live in desperate poverty around the world today than was the case even a generation ago. Much sickness remains to be cured, but some diseases that used to kill or cripple millions have been almost eradicated.

Our politics and social divisions may be disturbing and disheartening, but this is not like the time of the Civil War. Racism remains an ugly reality we still need to address, but our country practiced slavery for centuries and tolerated legal segregation until just decades ago, and every person of goodwill in America now is glad that those days are gone.

Too many men still fail to treat women with respect, and opportunities are not yet as open to all people as they need to be. But laws have changed and attitudes are changing, and people are holding one another accountable more conspicuously and in greater numbers than ever before.

We need to remember that our efforts matter, and that what we do or fail to do can make a great difference. I mentioned once before that when I was visiting Malawi a few years ago with some folk from Westminster, I saw a tile on the wall in our distinguished host's home. It displayed a quotation from Margaret Mead: "Don't ever doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Well, that's almost true. Jesus Christ has changed the world, too, and Christ calls his followers to join with him in his great work of redemption.

Even in that portion of the gospel called the Little Apocalypse – the part where Jesus tells what we might expect at the end of the age – even then he says that when people are frightened by all that's going on around them, they should know that their redemption is drawing near. When things look their worst, that may turn out to be

precisely the time when the kingdom of God is about to arrive.

In challenging times, people of faith need to resist the temptation to wring our hands in futile frustration. We need to search instead for signs of God's redemption. We need to train ourselves to look for the helpers, and join the ranks of the helpers ourselves.

If we ask what God might be doing here and now, then even the greatest challenges of our time will turn out to be more opportunities for faithfulness. Our faith will help us find the wisdom we need, and the Spirit of God will give us strength to join in the work of Christ, walking with him and living with him together, serving on the side of God's redemption.



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