



June 14, 2020

Ordinary Time, Proper 6

First Christian Church 1609 East Ash St. Goldsboro, NC 27530

Minister Rev. Dr. Tom Millay

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Weekly Conference Calls every Sunday at 9:45 AM and every Wednesday at 6:45 PM.

Here is all you do: Dial 712-770-5505 and then wait for instructions to enter access code, which is 300904#.

Update on Church Re-gathering

Plans were approved by the Board on June 9 for an outside worship experience on a Sunday, June 28 at 9:30 am. The service will last about 30 minutes. Masks will be encouraged, and we ask that you bring your own lawn chair. Our worship services will still be available online.



Some of our graduates were highlighted in our June newsletter. If we did not receive your info about graduates in time for the June newsletter, we will be glad to include in the July newsletter, so send any pictures you have to Andrew (goacanes87@yahoo.com) and send info to Tom over email (tom.millay54@gmail.com) or text (919-273-7030). Thanks!

Youth

Camp Caroline won't meet in person this summer... but there is still hope! There is going to be an online version of the K-12 camp starting Monday June 22 and every Monday following until July 20. They will be available at <https://ncdisciples.org/vitual-camp/>. No registration or fee is required. To get further details, you can get in touch with Tom.

Elders

A reminder for our church elders to contact Andrew (goacanes87@yahoo.com) or Will (bartlettwill1@gmail.com) to record readings of our July Scriptures in our chapel.

Fathers

With Fathers' Day coming up, we'd like to honor the fathers in our congregation. Just like we did for our mothers, if you would like to send in a picture to either Andrew or Tom

(email or text), we will post it on our website. If you would like your father's name to be posted, please say so explicitly in your message.

Worship

Welcome to Worship! Visit us online at www.firstchristiangoldsboro.org for several videos posted by 9:00 AM each Sunday: our Sermon, our Old Testament and Epistle Readings by Elders. Our lectionary readings this Sunday are: *Genesis 18:1-15; Ps. 116:1-2, 12-19; Romans 5:1-8, and Matthew 9:35-10:8.*

Sermon

"#blessed?"

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Revelation 21:1-4. It is a beautiful picture of what God intends for us at the end of days. It says: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'"

With what's going on in most of our lives, this is a word we need to hear every day: that God is going to end suffering, that God is going to take away our pain, that for God death is an enemy that will be destroyed (1 Cor 15:26). We need that word, now more than ever.

Yet that word is not today's word. In our epistle lesson for the day, Paul talks about boasting in his sufferings—almost as if they were a good thing. And, strange as the words may seem, Paul is not alone in thinking this way. There are other passages that speak like this too.

There is Psalm 73, where we see that it is the wicked who have prosperity in this life, whose "bodies are sound and sleek," who "have no pain" (Ps 73:4), who are "always at ease," increasing in riches" (Ps 73:12). But it is the righteous who suffer (Ps 73:14), whose bones are crushed (Ps 51:8), whose mouths are dried up

like a potsherd (Ps 22:15), and who make for themselves a bed of tears (Ps 6:6). Then there is the book of 1 Peter, whose main theme is suffering for doing what is right. If you are eager to do good, Peter tells us, you will suffer (1 Pt 3:13-14). And on top of Peter, Paul, and the psalmist, let's not forget Jesus, who tells us to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and then to follow him (Mt 16:24). If we are going to save our lives, Jesus says, we must lose them (Mt 16:25).

Why does the Bible speak this way? Why does it seem like God wants to end all suffering, and yet asks us to suffer?

There's a clear answer to this. The world we live in is ruled by the forces of evil. The book of Ephesians tells us our struggle is not against individual people. No, it is "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). And Psalm 53 gives us a picture of a world completely ruled by evil, whose emissaries eat up God's people "as they eat bread" (Ps 53:4).

The witness given to us across all these Scriptures is that, in a world ruled by evil, the good are going to suffer. Isn't this after all the story of Jesus?

Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian, uses an analogy to get at the reality the Scriptures are describing here. He uses the example of a watermark. A watermark is the slight indentation on a piece of paper made by a stamp with a particular design, and that design lets you know that this piece of paper is authentically from the person who is claiming to send it. It is a way to make sure that this document you are holding is what it says it is.

Suffering, Kierkegaard says, is the watermark of the Christian life. It is the way we know: here is a person who is following Christ. Here is an authentic copy, the real deal. Here is a person who is living out at least some of the good that the Lord has called us to live out. The authorities of this world oppose this person because of the goodness she is making manifest in her life. They oppose her and try to silence her by force. We'll see this next week too, when we find Jeremiah thrown into the bottom of a well, sinking into the mud.

I say all this about suffering because we live in the age of #blessed. When people use this label, "blessed," what is it usually applied to? A new job, maybe. A promotion. A marriage. The return of good health. The safe birth of a child or a grandchild.

And there's a way in which this is all fine. These *are* blessings.

But when is the last time you heard someone use this label for something bad? When's the last time you read "Was tear gassed this morning while standing in solidarity with my black brothers and sisters. #blessed"?

Yet maybe this is exactly how we should understand this word. After all, what do the Beatitudes say? "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are they that mourn... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Mt 5:3-4, 10). So, if we've just read the Beatitudes, who should we say God's blessing applies to? The answer is clear. God's blessing applies to those who are suffering.

Now I want to be clear about what this means, because this can be very dangerous theology. This type of theology has often been used in the past to tell suffering people that they need to keep suffering. It has been used to tell the poor that they need to stay poor. It has been used to tell women that they should stay in abusive relationships. It has been used to tell slaves that they shouldn't seek their own freedom. Given this history, I believe this is a good rule of thumb: let's not tell other people how they should keep suffering, or how it is in God's plan for them to keep suffering. It was a bad idea when Job's friends told him how he should be suffering, and it's still a bad idea now.

What our text for today says is something different. It says: If you are suffering, there is reason to hope. *If* you are suffering, there is reason to hope. Paul doesn't tell his Roman audience to remain in their sufferings. He doesn't tell them that if they are in prison they shouldn't try to get out. He doesn't say they shouldn't raise their voices against injustice. He simply says: *if*, if you are suffering—and I've heard that you are—there is reason to hope. This is a freeing word to those who are hurting. If you are suffering, Paul says, that's not all there is. Your life is not completely defined by the oppression you experience. Here, today, in our Scripture, God has provided us a window into the depth of a life that might on the surface seem to be nothing but pain. Below that surface, there is the

love of the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts. The life of suffering, Paul says, can also be a life of endurance, character, and hope. There can be joy amidst suffering.

This is not the happiness we usually associate with #blessed. It is something deeper, something unshakeable. It is "Christ crucified," which is foolishness to the world; but to us it is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24). It is Christ joyful even amidst his earthly despair. It is the sign that the world will not win, that—whatever happens—we will be "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37).

So, I ask you today, what struggle are you a part of? What are you suffering for? Is there a part of your life where you can say that you are fighting the rulers of this age? And can you find hope in that? Because if you can find hope, it means that you can endure. And that is truly a hard thing. Not to grow weary of doing good (Gal 6:9), but to persist, knowing that you may not—in fact, probably will not—be rewarded in this life.

What makes such an effort worthwhile? In the way this world calculates what is beneficial, nothing. But we know of a greater benefit than this world can ever provide: God with us (Rom 5:5). Let us find our true hope in God and in God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

Prayers of the Parish: God you are with those who suffer. You pour your love into their hearts. We ask today that you especially visit the members of this church: let them know your love is near. Be present also to heal our city, our state, our country, and our world, all of which are broken, all of which need your intervention. God who tears down dividing walls and who desires the liberation of all, work in our world today.

May your ear be close to us today as we pray. We confess to You any sins and faults of our own that have kept You at a distance, and pray you have mercy on us, forgive us, restore us to fellowship with you and unity with one another. Open our hearts to those who you have placed on our minds today, as we each lift before you those we have been given to care for. Protect also all those who in danger today because of the pandemic, for those who provide essential services of all kinds. Mourn with those who mourn. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Give us Your peace.

Please hear our prayers for:

Grace Price, Eloise Kleinert, Mary Ethel Lewis, Kathy and G. A. Spain, June Anderson, Willie and Faye Rogers, Rick Rogers (Faye & Willie Rogers' son), John and Becky Selzer, Rebecca Daniels, Mary Ellen Ham, Lorraine Loch, Val Watkins (Brantley's sister-in-law), the Spain's great granddaughter Katie, Molly McEldowney (Sharon Jones' daughter) and her brother, David Reynolds, Robert Strader (June Anderson's son-in-law), Jodie Hudson, Eddie Stewart, Linda Hilburn, Lee Summerlin, Gary Bartlett, Bill Smith, Gordon Aycock (friend of June Anderson), Chuck Allen, and the Kleinert Family, Family of Dennis Horne in the death of his Aunt Linda Sides and Family of Ruby Santee in the death of her sister, Margaret Medlin, Melissa Acres, Mary Anne Cowley, Mary Ellen Ham, Ruby Santee, Linda McCoy, and the family of Teenie Wilson.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Communion You may pick up individual communion packs at the entry table at the parking lot entrance Mondays from 10 to 12 or Tuesdays from 10 to 12 or use your own bread and juice at home. You may also drop off your offerings at that time.

A Moment for Meditation

Our Hebrew Bible reading for the day comes from Genesis 18. There we find the story of the "three visitors" who arrive and speak to Abraham. It's a deeply mysterious story, especially because there is a shifting back and forth between talking about the three visitors as three visitors (Gen 1:2, 16) and talking about them as one visitor, called "the LORD" (Gen 18:1, 17). To the early and medieval churches, the explanation of this mysterious shift between three people and one person was clear: Genesis 18 was talking about the Trinity. Here was the Trinity, showing up and making itself known in a revelation to Abraham.



This interpretation generated one of the most famous religious images of the Christian church, Andrei Rublev's Trinity icon. What most strikes me about the image is how each member of the Trinity's head is inclined toward the others. As they sit around the table Abraham has made for them, there is clearly mutual affection and even love coming from each member toward the others. Rublev's point is that what appeared to Abraham is a revelation of the eternal God, and that God is eternally a sharing of love between three persons, each of whom inclines their head toward the others. God is eternally a gift of love shared among people. This sharing of love is the most basic principal of all reality; it is the reason why anything other than God exists. God is a sharing of love, and we were made as an extension of this sharing. We were created to give gifts of love. If you ever wondered what it means to be made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), *here is the answer. We were made for communion. We were made to share love with one another, and that is why when we do share love, that is when we feel most alive. So let us celebrate communion together today.*

Preparing the Lord's Table with Our Offerings - Let us prepare the Lord's Table with our Offerings. Thank you for your faithfulness in sharing your offerings during this time. You may drop them *by the church office from 10 to 12 on Monday or Tuesday of each week, by calling Wanda for another time, or by mailing in.*

Offering Prayer

Words of Institution - On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took the bread and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my Body broken for you. Eat this in remembrance of me. In the same manner after supper, Jesus took the Cup and when he had blessed it, he gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my blood of a new covenant, poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it in remembrance of him."

The Gifts of God for the People of God. *Thanks be to God!*

The Lord's Prayer Let us now pray together the prayer our Lord taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Benediction Prayer You are God: we praise you. You are the Lord: we acclaim you. You are the eternal Father: all creation worships you. To you all angels, all the powers of heaven, Cherubim and Seraphim, sing in endless praise: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. The glorious company of apostles praise you. The noble fellowship of prophets praise you. The white-robed army of martyrs praise you. Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you. Let us bring your praise into the world! Amen.

Announcements and Calendar

Camp Caroline Virtual Camp begins June 22 (see information above)

Elders Meeting, Thursday, June 25, at 6:45 PM (Conference Call or Zoom, TBA)

Outdoor Church Service, Sunday, June 28, at 9:30 AM (see information above)

Administration Meeting, Tuesday, July 7, at 6:45 PM (Conference Call)

Some addresses: **Mary Ellen Ham** has been moved to the acute side of Kitty Askins,
107 Handley Park Court, Goldsboro, NC 27534

Mary Anne Cowley 225 West Park St. Cary, NC 27511

Scotty Percise (Teenie Wilson's daughter)

203 Plantation Road

Goldsboro, NC 27530