

Citizens of God
Bilingual Worship, June 3, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Psalm 15:1-4; Romans 12:1-13

Across scripture, from one end of the Bible to the other, God gives us a picture of the community of faith that balances individual and collective identity. That picture portrays a community unlike any other.

We heard that in how this morning's psalm describes those who dwell with the Almighty on God's "holy hill" and in God's "tent." They are, the psalmist says, those who do what is right, who avoid slander and evil-doing and who do not criticize or judge their neighbors. The psalmist also says God's people are to speak truth in their hearts. And in the truth of our hearts, we must acknowledge that living by these standards is a lot easier said than done.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul raises the bar even higher. In his letter to the church at Rome, he adds more dimension and depth to scripture's portrait of the community of faith.

The first 11 chapters of the book of Romans are Paul's treatise on how, in Christ, God extended divine, saving grace to Jew and Gentile alike. Again, we are reminded that God's love is inclusive. Then Paul turns to describe how the community of faith is to respond to that inclusive grace. One commentator writes that these verses give us the equivalent of the "core values" of that first set of believers, who were known simply as the "assembly."

The word Paul uses for "assembly" - ecclesia - is significant. In Greek, it means those who are "called out." Out of what, we might ask? Out of the world, out from the rest, to stand apart, in contrast from the norms of the society that surrounds it. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" that you may know the will of God. Again, we might mutter to ourselves, a lot easier said than done. Still, we keep at it, one step at a time.

Today we have the blessing of worshipping together, as one community. We are not all Presbyterians. We are not all from America. Rather, we are from many wondrous places, each with its own heritage, its own story. We know the pressures to conform, to fit in.

Our friends from the bilingual preschool – mostly first-generation immigrants to the United States – know what it's like to seek that balance of individual and collective identity, how to hold on to their culture and heritage and, at the same time, embrace what it means to live, work and make a life here.

Any Christian knows that delicate balance, too, the daily decisions it takes to avoid being conformed by the broken ways of the world, to seek not just to stand apart, but even to be transformed to be the people God calls us to be.

Paul's "core values" are clear – make your life into a sacrifice to God, he says, in response to God's love in Jesus Christ. A tall order, yes. But Paul gives us detailed instructions. In his plain-language translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul's counsel this way:

"Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who deeply practice playing second fiddle.

"Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality."

This is what it means to be citizens of God, Paul says. Not citizens of any one nation or state or city, but citizens of the place where God calls us to dwell, wherever we call home, wherever we hang our hat. Indeed, Paul says, God calls us out of the norms of any earthly idea of community or even family.

Did you hear that last line of Peterson's more modern translation? The New Revised Standard Version that we have in our pews reads, "extend hospitality to strangers." Extend. Reach beyond ourselves and out to others. But Peterson's version takes it a bit further; "be inventive in hospitality."

In our own way, I suppose that's what we're doing this morning. We're experimenting with these bilingual worship services. Trying new things. Extending beyond ourselves, in both directions - Caldwell to our friends from the preschool and the preschool families back to us. On behalf of the people of Caldwell, we recognize that for the preschool families to worship with us and walk with us in community is their own act of extension. It is far easier for them to worship in all-Spanish language churches. To come here is an act of non-conformity on their part. Thanks be to God for their spirit of generosity and flexibility and for their courage.

For us at Caldwell, our own act of non-conformity is to conduct bilingual worship – but we are given this chance as a blessing. The truth is, that is what it will take for us, all of us, to move forward, together. Courage for our Latino brothers and sisters to step out of their norm and courage for us to do the same. Not just here in worship. But in building relationships and common bonds together as our city and our nation move more and more quickly toward that “melting pot” community we’ve always talked about.

And, brothers and sisters, it’s vital that we not lose sight of what we are about. Eleazar Fernandez teaches at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. He emphasizes that: *“The church’s relationship to the world was modeled by early Christian communities: being ‘in’ the world but not ‘of’ the world.”*

Commenting on today’s scripture in Romans, Fernandez says: “Hospitality is a distinctive mark of the church, which was born out of hospitality and spread because of hospitality ... hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.”

He’s onto something, I think, something we’ve experienced here at Caldwell. But he doesn’t stop there. Fernandez goes on to say this:

“Hospitality does not mean simply welcoming newcomers into our congregation and doing charitable acts, important as they are. We must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; hospitality as justice offers a place at the table (h)ospitality involves transformation of the system that is inhospitable to many.”

That is the work – and I hope – the joy offered to us. As one more step on that journey, we can attend a new series of classes on immigration in light of faith beginning tonight here at Caldwell. I hope to see you there.

In closing, we are given an image worth holding onto. In a film about God’s work at this church, preschool parent and my friend Filiberto Moran says that worshipping with us at Caldwell makes him feel as though he will “live for another 200 years.”

I hope he’s right. And, just in case he doesn’t quite make it that long, I pray that there will be a church, even a Presbyterian church, even one right here on this corner, where Filiberto’s descendents come to worship and to call others to be citizens, not of any one nation or race or ethnicity, but of God. Amen.