

Founders' Sunday Sermon – Steadfast Neighbor
Scripture Reading – Psalm 36, Galatians 5:14
Sunday, May 19, 2019
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our scripture reading on this Founders' Sunday is Psalm 36. In this poignant profession of faith, the psalmist affirms the gift of life and the steadfast love of God, which holds life and the world together. Even in the midst of the hatred, arrogance, and violence that seem so prevalent, even when it appears the world is falling apart, the psalmist confidently prays for God's steadfast love and righteousness, because the psalmist trusts that God's love is the fundamental reality in the universe and God's righteousness holds the world together.

The richness of the psalmist's theology is the acknowledgement of the evil in a world that is not often fair or just and the affirmation that we belong to a loving God who is steadfast, consistent, reliable, and totally for us. Hear now, God's holy word.

*Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts;
there is no fear of God before their eyes.*

*² For they flatter themselves in their own eyes
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.*

*³ The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;
they have ceased to act wisely and do good.*

*⁴ They plot mischief while on their beds;
they are set on a way that is not good; they do not reject evil.*

⁵ Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

*⁶ Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.*

*⁷ How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.⁸*

*They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.⁹ For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.¹⁰ O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!*

*¹¹ Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.*

*¹² There the evildoers lie prostrate;
they are thrust down, unable to rise. Amen.*

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The text for this morning's sermon is found in Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia (5:14). The loving God who is steadfast, consistent, reliable, and totally for us calls us to be faithful and steadfast in our love for one another. Hear God's consistent word.

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

The title of the sermon “Steadfast Neighbor”

Let us pray. Loving God, Creator, Savior and Advocate, we gather with grateful hearts to honor our past, to celebrate the present, and to look with hope to the future because of who you are and who you call us to be with steadfast love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This week we said good-bye to a steadfast performer, Doris Day, who consistently and reliably lifted the spirits of those who were benefactors of her command performance on the stage and screen. She died at the age of 97. The granddaughter of Dutch and German immigrants, Doris was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her mom was a homemaker, and her father was a music teacher and choirmaster.

Doris developed an early interest in dance and was quite gifted, performing locally in a dance duo. Tragically, a car accident at the age of 15 severely injured one leg and dashed her dreams of becoming a professional dancer.

During the extended, difficult months of recovery from the car accident, Doris began to sing along with the radio and discovered a talent she did not know she had. Voice lessons from a generous mentor who recognized Doris’ potential opened doors to opportunity. A long and brilliant career in singing, and then acting, would grow in the stead of the dancing dreams she mourned.

In 1956 Doris sang what would become her signature song “Qué Será, Será.” The song was introduced in the Alfred Hitchcock film *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and received the Academy Award for Best Original Song that year. In this classic Hitchcock thriller weaving suspense and levity, Doris Day and Jimmy Stewart play the parts of wife and husband traveling through Morocco with their son who is abducted as they become entangled in an assassination plot. The French “Qué Será, Será” is loosely translated “Whatever will be, will be.”

In a 2012 NPR interview with Terri Gross, Doris shared that her signature song was not one of her favorites. When it was added to the screenplay, she didn’t think it made sense contextually and believed its light-hearted, passive theme was incongruent with the grave circumstances within the movie’s plot. What mother, when faced with the kidnapping of her son, would sing “Whatever will be, will be?”

As a person, who when confronted with her own crisis, disappointment, and dashed dreams, took positive initiative to recover and to discover a new dimension within herself that would change the course of her life, this platitude rang hollow.

Rather than “whatever will be, will be,” a more appropriate response for this bereaved mother and all who face adversity with tenacity would be “what we will do, will be done.”

During times of challenge and tragedy, people of faith do not need platitudes and clichés, people need the confidence of the psalmist who believed she belonged to the God whose steadfast love and righteousness hold the world together. Even in the midst of hatred, arrogance, and violence, those who trust in the steadfast love of God do not submit or resign themselves to their circumstances as if they were helpless. Rather, people of faith transform platitudes into beatitudes and become people of action, commitment, and foresight.

Westminster is the congregation we are today because when confronted with challenges in our past we chose not to accept "Qué Será, Será." On this Founders' Sunday we honor the vision and the fortitude of the thirty charter members who gathered on May 26, 1835 to begin our journey as a congregation. We are grateful for their abolitionist convictions and positive initiative to advocate for justice and freedom on behalf of their neighbors and for their refusal to acquiesce to the slavery status quo with "whatever will be, will be."

Three-quarters of a century later as we entered the twentieth century, Westminster had the foresight to construct this magnificent sanctuary in the style of rural early English gothic at the outskirts of the capitol city of Springfield, with the hope of creating a steadfast home for a thriving congregation, but not without considerable financial risk. In fact, it wasn't until a half century later in 1956 that construction of the Bell Tower would complete this visionary project ...Westminster once again, steadfastly staying the course!!

As Westminster approached the twenty-first century, social and financial forces confronted the congregation with yet another difficult decision. Following the civil rights movement and in the context of school desegregation, this neighborhood of lovely Victorian homes saw migration, divestment, and financial decline.

On May 2, 1999, four years following the establishment of the Westminster Endowment Plan and the call of the Rev. Dr. Lonnie Lee, Westminster voted at a congregational meeting to remain in its stead and to continue its ministry in this historic church and in this historic neighborhood. By staying the course, Westminster chose to stabilize and to invest in our neighborhood, to strengthen our roots and to celebrate the rich history of our founders, the legacy of faith upon which we continue to build. Twenty years hence, because of these decisions, considerable financial commitment, and wise investment of our resources, we now have the means to beautify our grounds and invest in the neighborhood in specific and thoughtful ways. "What we will do, will be done."

Ultimately, the popular lyrics "what will be, will be" are manifest through God's providential grace and our call to respond, to trust, and to act. People of faith do not passively accept what comes their way. Rather, we are proactive, reformed and always reforming, and looking for a way to make a positive difference in our world and in our neighborhood. By trusting in God's grace, we not only embrace God's steadfast love, but also we have hope in a future we cannot see.

Qué Será, Será. Whatever will be, will be. The futures not ours to see. Qué Será, Será.'

Through the steadfast love of God, the reliable grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the consistent advocacy of the Holy Spirit, what we will do, will be done, and whatever will be, will be. Amen.