Sermon – Faith, Art, and Advocacy
Founders' Sunday, May 18, 2025
Scripture – Psalm 145, Luke 4:16-20
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading is Psalm 146, a psalm of praise for God's power and faithfulness, particularly in God's care for the oppressed and poor. The psalmist delights in God's actions of justice, compassion, and deliverance. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

Praise God! Praise God, O my soul!
I will praise God as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs,
they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free; and opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; and loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers; God upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion,
for all generations. Praise the Lord! Amen.

Our second scripture reading is from the gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 16-20. Jesus begins his ministry from whence he came, in Nazareth, with a reading that reveals the heart of his calling: to care for the oppressed and poor and to advocate for justice, compassion, and deliverance. Hear now, the word of God.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Amen.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Title of the Sermon: Faith, Art, and Advocacy

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, 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. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

At my installation service on November 10, 2013, a dear friend, colleague, and Methodist minister from St. Louis, the Rev. Dr. Jack Heyward, gave the charge to the congregation, sharing that his grandmother was born into slavery. Westminster's founding by 30 ardent abolitionists on May 26, 1835, deeply and personally moved Jack. He paused for a moment in this chancel to gain his composure, and then he called on us to continue our advocacy for freedom, justice, and equity.

When Dale Smith and I had lunch together at the Sangamo Club on October 25, 2018 and he shared with me that Westminster's Endowment would receive a substantial gift from his mother Betty, he recalled how his parents were drawn to Westminster's abolitionist roots, having met in Charleston, the largest slave city on the east coast.

Our story, my friends, begins with advocacy inspired by faith, born out of humility, and grounded in the conviction that we are all equal in the eyes of God. *There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28)

On November 13, 1849, fourteen years after our founding, this abolitionist congregation expanded their advocacy to include the welcome and support of Presbyterian refugees fleeing religious persecution by the Roman Catholic Church in Madeira, Portugal.

Last summer, Peter and I visited the Island of Madeira during a two-week study leave in search of a connection to the Portuguese refugees our congregation welcomed. We serendipitously met the pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church which was born out of their ancestors' struggle. The Rev. Jorge Gameiro invited me to bring greetings during worship on August 18, 2024 on behalf of our beloved congregation who brought good news and deliverance to their forefathers and mothers.

Fourteen years later in 1863, amidst our civil war to free the captives of this nation, our congregation provided homes for refugee children fleeing warfare in Arkansas, just months after our church bell tolled in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Rev. Albert Hale who served as our pastor from 1840-1867, was known as the friend and counselor of the Martyr President, and his wife Abiah established the Dorcas Society of women who were the hands and feet of good news to the refugees, widows and orphans we welcomed. The Dorcas Society later became the Illinois Children and Family Services. Albert and Abiah formed the character of this congregation and those of us sitting in these chancel stalls, donated by Robert Lincoln in 1908, are honored to have followed Reverend Hale and contributed a small part to this congregation's rich history of faith, art and advocacy.

In 1908, following three previous locations, we dedicated this rural English Gothic-style building. Much of the mission statement we will read together today was written for that dedication service. The architectural beauty and distinct stain glass windows in this sacred space reflect a deep appreciation and commitment to the arts, and nothing is more lovely than the art

of advocacy and our commitment to social justice. *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news,* Isaiah 52:7.

Whether it was Rev. Dr. Jim Barge marching with Coretta Scott King and 40,000 other protesters in Memphis on April 8th 1968, four days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. or our youth rebuilding tornado-devastated homes and walking across the bridge at Selma in 2023, we are committed to the art of advocacy. Whether it is members opening their homes to Cuban refugees fleeing Castro in 1962 or our congregation welcoming a Vietnamese family fleeing their war-torn nation in 1975 or working together to create a lovely home in 2024 as we welcomed refugees from Nicaragua during a time of heightened rhetoric regarding tyranny, hatred, and immigrants, we are committed to the art of advocacy.

Toward the end of the twentieth century our Historic Westside Neighborhood of lovely Victorian homes saw migration, divestment, and financial decline following the civil rights movement and in the context of school desegregation. In 1999, four years following the establishment of the Westminster Endowment Plan, Westminster made a important decision to remain in its stead and to continue our ministry in this historic neighborhood.

When Peter and I first walked through the doors of Westminster, we were taken aback by the beauty of this facility. Not only did the walls speak of the rich history of this congregation, but they also echoed the faithful nurture given to the generations of children and youth who walked through these doors. The rooms reverberated with the steadfast gift of stunning music and the congregation's consistent commitment through the generations to reach outside our doors to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, and to set free those who are oppressed.

At the conclusion of a successful anniversary endowment campaign in 2020, financial resources made yet another outreach possible in the Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor. The homestead of our church as a light and anchor within the neighborhood was strengthened in a Site and Landscape Plan, and the homesteads of our immediate neighbors continue to be strengthened through mission outreach which provides matching grants, an annual service week, a habitat house, and the Little Pantry and Library at Graham Elementary School.

Today, as we celebrate 190 Years of Faith, Art, and Advocacy, our prayer, with the Apostle Paul, is that we never grow weary of doing what is right and that we work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity, For generations to come, may we proclaim the Good News of our faith, celebrate the beauty of God's creation, and advocate for our neighbors near and far. So be it! Amen.