

Sermon – “Remember Who You Are”  
Scripture – I John 3:1-3, John 20:19-31  
Sunday, April 27, 2014  
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Our first scripture reading is I John 3:1-3. In this passage an older, wiser John affirms that the children of God are characterized by God's love. God's love is the thread that binds all believers together, past and present and creates community. Because of God's love in the death and resurrection of Christ, we share the conviction that death is not the end of our life with one another or with God. Somehow, in ways beyond our understanding, we will belong to one another even beyond death. Hear now God's word.

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

Our second scripture reading, John 20:19-31, continues the events we read together last Sunday on Easter morning. We find the disciples in hiding, frightened and uncertain. Jesus makes two appearances to the gathered disciples, one with and one without Thomas. These appearances have similarities. Jesus comes despite closed doors on the first day of the week and offers the same greeting. And yet the two appearances play differing roles in John's narrative. The first describes the beginning of the church and the second concerns faith. After Thomas sees the physical evidence, he responds with a phrase very familiar to the readers of John's gospel. “My Lord and My God” was the profession of faith statement within the Johannine community. Hear now the word of God.

*19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin ), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

The title of the sermon “Remember Who You Are”

The text for today’s sermon is 1 John 3:1. I would like to invite the confirmands to open your new study Bibles to the bookmark. You will find these words highlighted: *See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, for the joy of being your child and for the privilege of belonging to you and to one another in this family of faith, we give you thanks. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen

Confirmation is a milestone in the life of our young people and in our life together. We gather as a community to witness their profession of faith and to welcome them into this fellowship of believers. As our children stand before us—so grown up—we wonder when did we come to this place on our journey together? It seems like only yesterday we were welcoming them into the world. Yes, their journey to this milestone began the day they were born and over the years we have experienced many changes, growth and times of transitions in their young lives.

Life is full of changes and so to be alive is to constantly be moving in and out of times of transition. Some of our transitions are easier than others. Whatever the reason for change, this time is always a little awkward and frightening precisely because we are experiencing something new. We are no longer standing on the security of the old...the foundation we have known and trusted has been removed. What is new may be equally reliable and even surpass the strength of the old but we do not know that yet. We need time to explore, to step lightly or heavily (depending on our individual personality) in order to find our own confidence.

As parents and a community of faith we seek to sustain our children through the times of transition which are a part of growing up. The world of the toddler (or what is affectionately known as the Terrible Twos) is probably our children’s first encounter with change when they are asked to give up the secure world of being a baby. It’s an in-between time that can be a little frightening and their most common response is often NO!

Adolescence is the next major time of transition, according to human growth and development theory. It’s another time of saying no, another time of giving up what has just become comfortable in the world of the child. This is the time in our tradition that young people are invited to profess their faith; to “confirm” that Jesus, the one whom they have been learning stories about through the years of their childhood, is *their Lord and their God.*

Before we know it our children are off to college to begin their final transition into adulthood where they are expected to live their lives without the physical presence of their parents. Although in their “remembering” and through the memories they carry with them in their hearts...the presence of their parents and home and faith community can sustain them through another time of change and new beginning. (pause)

The time between Easter morning and Pentecost was certainly a time of transition for the disciples of Jesus. There were 40 days between the resurrection of their Lord and his ascension, according to Christian tradition. Ten days following the ascension, on Pentecost, the spirit gave birth to Christ’s church. In as much as Pentecost is a beginning for the disciples, Good Friday was the end of something very precious. The physical presence of their beloved friend and mentor would not again be a part of their experience.

Needless to say this time of transition was a little awkward for the disciples. More than awkward ...these men and the women with them were terrified, and we would have been also. Unfortunately, over the years the church has been critical of the disciples during this time. Rather than understanding why they were hiding behind closed doors, for fear on the evening of this first day, but also a week later still hiding, we read passages such as these and our first inclination is to criticize them, especially Thomas whom we have come to know as *Doubting Thomas*. Why do we seek to criticize Thomas for his uncompromising honesty and for the ease with which he acknowledges his own awkwardness and uncertainty? His uncanny. NO!

So if we remember anything about these two stories of the disciples in the upper room, *the doors being shut*, let us not so much remember that Thomas doubted as we remember of what he asked to be reminded. *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*"

And in our own times of transition and change, let us have the same uncompromising honesty with God as Thomas did. Only then will we discover for ourselves, what Jesus demonstrated in his life and death, that peace will be found in our own wounds of love. When we have the courage to grow through transitions and changes...the times of loss, of giving up, we can begin to move beyond ourselves, from behind closed doors, and reach out to others. Jesus said, *'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'*

Today we send our confirmands out into the world to be bearers of Christ's peace following a time of transition. I am thankful for their young lives and uncompromising honesty in the questions they asked Peter and me during our time together this year as they seek to know and understand *their Lord and their God*. The words I leave with them on this milestone day would be *Remember who you are...*

A Presbyterian minister recalled how his mother would say these words to him when she would drop him off at school or a sports event or a friend's house, growing up. As he got out of the car, he would hear his mother's voice, saying... "Remember who you are..." It wasn't until some years later as he reflected on this experience that he began to understand what his mother was saying. In retrospect, he thought...it wasn't that my mother was afraid I was going to forget my name. It wasn't even really that she was afraid I would step out of bounds and push the limits of what was acceptable behavior...although this might have been a part of it. No, what my mother wanted me to remember, he recalled with affection, is that I am a child of God. I belong to a God who loves me and who will walk with me no matter where my journey leads.

What my mother wanted me to remember, is that I belong to a God who joined me in my humanity and who conquered death by dying on a cross...a God who forgives, a God who accepts all people, a God who provides new beginnings and a God who brings wholeness out of brokenness. *Jesus came and stood among them and showed them his hands and his side.*

What my mother wanted me to remember, is that I belong to a God who calls me to be a witness to what I believe, living out my faith in acts of kindness and generosity, treating others as I would like to be treated...with dignity and respect. *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."*

And so today, we, the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church join this wise mother, and say to each one of you. Remember who you are! As you go out into the world, as you continue your journey, as you pursue your dreams and aspirations, you will thrive and make a difference in the world. And you will face challenges, disappointments and losses along the way. You will know success and you will make mistakes. When you fall down, by the grace of God, you will pick yourself up and start all over again.

Why? ...because you are a child of God. The Spirit of the Lord is upon you. You are embraced by the grace of God. There is nothing you can do, there is no place you can go that will be able to separate you from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Remember also, that you are a child of this congregation. You have a home. You will find nourishment and strength for the journey here. You are always welcome.

*See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. Amen.*