

Steadfast Neighbor Celebration Sunday  
Scripture Reading – Psalm 36, Galatians 5:13-14, 6:9-10  
Sunday, September 27, 2020  
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading on this Steadfast Neighbor Celebration Sunday is Psalm 36. In this powerful 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.*

The second scripture reading is found in Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, selected verses from chapters 5 and 6. 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 now God's consistent word.

*13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."  
9 So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10 So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. Amen.*

*The word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.*

The title of the meditation: "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.

Last weekend Peter and I took an unexpected trip to New Hampshire to say good bye to the homestead of his father and step-mother. Will died in 2006 and Ann recently sold their lovely nineteenth century farmhouse with an attached art studio surrounded by gardens.

Ann asked Will's children to gather to divide his sculptures, photos, and a few pieces of furniture that have been in the Kieffer Family for a couple of generations. It was a journey that was both jubilant and poignant as we remembered the times we gathered together in this homestead over the years, the interesting stories told, the delicious dinners served, and the lovely music that filled the rooms.

One of the frames we brought to Springfield holds a photo and picture poem which our son Paul wrote the year after Will died. The photo is of Peter and his Dad at our Clayton home doing a high five in front of our white picket fence and the gate they successfully installed with grandfather's flag pole in the background. Paul wrote this to describe the picture.

A white picket fence stands sturdy,  
My father and grandfather rejoice!  
My mother meets me in the eye from the  
    sideline of the project,  
A flag from my great-grandfather blows  
    in the strong wind,  
My fence is held by a sturdy hinge.  
The occasion was special...my grandfather  
    was at our house,  
Traveling to town became hard.  
He died last year.  
But this picture reminds me,  
this picture reminds me  
of the four generations,  
the flag, my grandfather, my father,  
and the white picket fence that stood so sturdy.

We gather today across the street from a white picket fence, mindful of the generations who have come before us, to celebrate the Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor which was intended to strengthen the homestead of Westminster Presbyterian Church and to invest in the homesteads of our neighbors.

Today we rejoice as we meet one another's eyes from the sideline of the project because we trust Westminster will stand sturdy within this beautiful neighborhood to proclaim, with the psalmist, God's steadfast love and faithfulness to all generations...and that for generations to

come, members and neighbors will work side by side across sturdy picket fences to create healthy boundaries with respect and affection,

Our prayer, with the Apostle Paul, is that we never grow weary of doing what is right, that we work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity, and that we do not use our freedom in Christ as an opportunity for self-indulgence. Our prayer is that for generations to come, we will answer the call from the One whose steadfast love holds life and the world together, the call to be faithful and steadfast in loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

When Peter and I first walked through the doors of Westminster seven years ago, we were both taken aback by the beauty of this facility. Not only did the walls speak of the rich history of this congregation, they echoed the faithful nurture given to the generations of children and youth who walked through these doors. The rooms reverberated with the stunning, steadfast gift of music and the consistent commitment through the generations to reach outside these doors in mission and community service. Westminster follows the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's words, "The door to happiness opens outward."

As we gather outside the open doors of our homestead to give one another a symbolic high five at the completion of the Steadfast Neighbor Site and Landscape Plan, we remember the generations who came before us to make this day possible.

Today, we rejoice in the thirty founding members who signed the church charter in 1835 and we give thanks for their abolitionist convictions and positive initiative to advocate justice and freedom for all God's children and for their steadfast refusal to (acquiesce) acquiesce to the slavery status quo.

Today, we rejoice in the decision at the beginning of the twentieth century to construct this church building in a rural early English gothic style on the outskirts of the capitol city of Springfield in 1908.

As we approached the twenty-first century, social and financial forces confronted the congregation with the need for another 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. In 1999, four years following the establishment of the Westminster Endowment Plan, this congregation voted to remain in its stead and to continue its ministry in this historic neighborhood. The decision to stay the course, considerable financial commitment in our endowment, and wise investment of those resources have made the Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor possible.

Today we rejoice in our lovely, Historic Westside neighborhood alongside our steadfast neighbors with whom we are partnering to nurture and cherish these legacy homes and to advocate for one another.

Because of the steadfast love of God, the reliable grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the consistent advocacy of the Holy Spirit, it is a beautiful day in this neighborhood. Amen.