

“Responsible, Givers, Caretakers, Builders”

Genesis 1:26-27a, Matthew 16:13-18 & 1 John 3:16-18

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Prayer for Understanding Gracious God, we come here with much on our minds and hearts. Some of us are worried, some of us frightened, others are anxious. Some of us are in love; some of us are in grief. Some are angry, some are happy to be alive. Some of us are grateful, joyful, others are hopeful. Some of us are at peace; others wonder what life is all about. We are together and we ask you to use this time to speak the word you have for each of us. Startle us with the immediacy and personal relevance of that word for our lives, and in your grace, help us to know again your steadfast, everlasting, love. Amen

I had the privilege of having the renowned biblical scholar Patrick Miller as my Old Testament teacher. Dr. Miller is widely acclaimed for his knowledge of ancient Israelite religion, understanding of languages and attention to nuances of text and history. Dr. Miller taught with great passion. He dedicated his life to understanding who God is and what God is doing in the world. He urged all of us to engage God through scripture to discover God's will for our lives. I do not remember most of the classes at Princeton Seminary 25 years ago. I do remember we spent an entire lecture on one and a half verses. I was especially tired that day and slumped in the chair in the back row. Dr. Miller's voice and entire body exuded the critical importance of understanding one word. Dr. Miller passionately explained how one Hebrew word translated “dominion” is misunderstood and ignores the context. His passion caused me to sit up and pay close attention. **Genesis 1:26-27a NRSV “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them.”** Hebrew words have a variety of meaning depending on context. This word can sometimes mean dominion, it also means to descend, go down, wander, and spread, it means to care for by walking among creation as an equal.

Listen to the context: **Genesis 1:26-27a NRSV “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, God created them.”** We are created in the image of God. God is love, joy, peace, gracious always cheering for us, always caring, healing, encouraging. God desires abundant life for us. Our relationship with each other and the cosmos is to mirror God's relationship with us. We are to walk creation, to have a relationship with the earth that is caring and causes abundant life to burst forth everywhere.

Presbyterian Pastor Eugene Peterson was also passionate in getting translations accurate. Eugene chose the English word “responsible.” **Genesis 1:26-27a MSG “God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, And, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.” God created human beings; God created them godlike, reflecting God's nature.”**

We are responsible for the cosmos. Our relationship with the cosmos is to reflect God's nature. What do you think of using the word “steward”? We are to be stewards of the cosmos. We are to be stewards of life. Our stewardship is to reveal God's nature, love joy, grace, peace, and wholeness.

God's love story for humanity begins with God creating an enormous, wonderful, majestic, good cosmos. God graciously gives it all to humanity, a gift, an opportunity to expand the goodness of the cosmos. We are created in God's image to be creative to give the cosmos gifts of art, music, architecture, medicine, literature, science, sports, games, language, technology, mechanics, farming and an array of love and joy. We are created in God's image to be creative in healing the earth, restoring creation, loving the world into wholeness. If one is reflecting the image of God within, then they create abundant goodness, permeate all with love, suffuse all with joy, comfort all with peace and mend all with grace and then they rest, admire their creation, and freely give it all away. That is one facet of stewardship. God loves you so much that God gave you the cosmos. God gave us gifts to care for the earth. We are designed to create goodness and give it all away.

Stewardship is a major biblical theme. God loves us completely so God lets us name the animals, plants, and the entire cosmos. God gives it all to us to fill us with joy and wonder, for us to discover how to love, care, heal and be gracious.

Elaine Pagels is a distinguished professor at Princeton University. She is not a seminary professor. She is a humanities scholar. Her specialty is early Christianity, and she is widely respected for her scholarly research and books. She is not particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church as an institution worthy of her time and attention, not unlike a lot of thoughtful people. She begins her new book, *Beyond Belief*, with an unusual—for her—anecdote and witness. On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupted her daily run by stopping in the doorway of an Episcopal church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with a fatal lung disease. She writes: “Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.”

Most of you know we are in the midst of our stewardship season, when we ask everyone to prayerfully consider the time, talents, and money we will give to North Presbyterian Church. It is a time of prioritizing our giving. Scripture declares we are to give our first fruits, the first of our paycheck. It is a time of pledges, budgets, and a \$19,925 deficit. It is a time of looking around at attendance, at the state of the church and wondering what this church will look like in the future. I invite you to go deeper beyond perhaps concern for the future of the church, or worry if we have the right style of ministry or optimism that all will be good or perhaps gratitude for all God is doing through the church or perhaps other thoughts and feelings you are experiencing. I invite you to ask why? Why would we want to do this? Why would we ask one another to invest so much, to give so much, to give money away? Is it, finally, all that important? Jesus declares, **“I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”** Why give money to North Presbyterian Church because the powers of hell will not conquer it, all the forms of death will not conquer it, all the forms of fear, hate, and division will not conquer it. Why give money to North Presbyterian Church because everyone at some point will be grieving, like Elaine, in need of a church who knows how to face every form of death, who knows that love and life will ultimately prevail.

Matthew 16:13-18 NLT “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ ‘Well,’ they replied, ‘some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.’ Then Jesus asked them, ‘But who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”

This is another facet of stewardship, Jesus through each individual is uniting us into a family of faith, building a church through us, that is us, of which Jesus is a member with us, to conquer hell, to resurrect death into life. Jesus reveals love. God so loves everyone that Jesus freely gave his life so everyone can have eternal life. Scripture proclaims: **1 John 3:16-18 NLT “We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.”**

Love was not diminished by Jesus’ death on the cross. Love grew into a new facet, resurrection. The supreme resurrection life of love is to be proclaimed by the church, by you and me, to all people. We give to build a church to stand against every form of death proclaiming resurrection life. We give to build a church to stand against war, fear, and hate, proclaiming community, peace, and love. We give to build a church to stand against doom, decreasing investments, recessions and scarcity proclaiming goodness, growth, expansion, and abundance. We give to build a church to stand against anger, guilt, imprisonment, division, and broken relationships proclaiming comfort, forgiveness, freedom, unity, and harmonious relationships. We give to build a church that knows how to face death, to cry together, to carry burdens together, to journey together to abundant life. We give to build a church that reminds the world that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, and so death did not defeat love incarnate, hell could not contain Jesus. Death is not what we thought. Death is a portal to everlasting life.

Let us also acknowledge that the church is a messed up, broken, distorted institution. We, the church, have done all sorts of horrible things and we continue to hurt each other on a regular basis, we argue and fight about almost everything. We get mad, sad, and hurt and some leave. And still the gates of hell will not conquer the church.

Sometimes our actions are petty and outrages. Arthur Herman tells of our history: “The Presbyterian Ulster Scots also brought [to the New World] their burning hatred of Episcopalians (especially since as British subjects, they had to pay taxes for the established Anglican church in America). When one Anglican missionary tried to preach in the Carolinas—the locals (Presbyterians) disrupted his services, rioted while he preached, started a pack of dogs fighting outside the church, loosed his horse, stole his church key, refused him food and drink, and gave two barrels of whiskey to his congregation. [Later, having escaped and returned to civilization, the missionary wrote about his Presbyterian adversaries:] “They delight in their present low, loutish, heathenish, hellish life and seem not desirous of changing it.”

As a church we are far from perfect. And sometimes the church is beautiful and brave and hopeful. Good and compassionate and redeeming things happen in the world through the church. Regularly, mostly quietly, people are fed, clothed, sheltered, educated, and nurtured. Regularly, mostly quietly, people are lifted up and given new sight, new vision, new life because of the church Jesus is building through us. Regularly, mostly quietly, we are radically different choosing to be gracious, kind and forgiving. Weekly we worship giving all praise, honor, and glory to God. I wonder how often someone’s life is transformed by the church without our knowledge. That Episcopal church would have not known the effect they had on a runner who paused by their door if she had not written that book. Regularly, mostly quietly, this church is expanding love.

As a church we are far from perfect. We are struggling to share this building with El Shadai and Faith Christian Home Educators. Things get misplaced and broken, wear and tear on the building, stains on the carpet, things are sometimes a mess, things do not get set up to our liking and we go through a lot of toilet paper. And we gather for the Festival of Cultures, singing, praying, eating, fellowshiping, worshipping together. The gates of hell of language barriers, cultural division, different skin color, conservative, moderate, liberal, frustration, cannot conquer the love that unites us all as a church. Our coexisting together in one building is inspiring to the world, a foretaste of all people living in community. We give to partner with Jesus in building a church of traveling companions on the journey of life, people to talk to, and argue with, people to love and care for, people who will believe and sing and pray on the days you can’t believe and sing and pray, people with whom to be light in the darkness, people who can face every form of death, people who with God’s help will journey to abundant life.

We give to partner with Jesus in building a church that is a reminder that death does not have the last word about us, our hopes, dreams, dearest ones, or deepest loves. Death does not have the last word. God does. The church’s ministry is to proclaim the promise, to remind one another on those days when life causes us to forget it, or doubt it, or disbelieve it, that the gates of hell will not prevail: God will. Love will. Life will. Resurrection will.

Pastor John Buchanan recalls: “An elderly gentleman appeared at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and asked if he might see the Chapel. A staff person took him to the chapel. He looked around and said it was exactly how he remembered it, and she asked him why he had visited Fourth Church. He was from Florida. “My wife and I were married here 50 years ago. We lived in Chicago and came to this church and were married in this chapel. She died last month and I just thought I’d drive up to Chicago and see where we lived and where we were married. I thought I’d come home.”

God has given us the cosmos. We are to reveal God’s joy, grace, peace, love, creativity, and goodness in our stewardship of the cosmos. We are on a journey of ever growing love, one step is being able to joyfully give all away. We our builders of the church, that is as messed up, broken and imperfect as each of us, and still is able to say no to all that diminishes life and share all that enhances life. We are the church, stewards of the cosmos, Easter people, who proclaim resurrection. Amen