

Philippians 4:2-9 “Heard and Seen” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/23/25

(Because I love Herb so much, I chose a scripture that had some wonderful biblical names in it just for him to read...just kiddin’) Our scripture today comes from this month’s giving theme from our denomination’s relief, refugee and development mission fund called Week of Compassion. This organization works to alleviate suffering throughout the world with a vision of a world where God’s people transform suffering into hope. The video shown earlier, which is also found on their website, helps to share a bit more about the work of this organization. I returned this past week from a continuing education trip to Washington D.C. where a part of my learning was connected to the process of turning suffering into hope, of practicing those things heard and seen from faith mentors like the apostle Paul, the author of our scripture today. I wanted to share just a couple photos with you, in addition to those shown during the announcement slides which were from the less serious, more fun aspect of the trip, an immersive Lego art exhibition unlike anything I have ever seen before.

My journey began at the Smithsonian’s American History Museum (slide 1) with an exhibit entitled “Many Voices, One Nation.” For any who have been to any of the Smithsonian museums, the exhibits change over time and this one felt particularly relevant for our times. The group I was with was invited to consider “Places of Negotiation” (slide 2) that have occurred in the birth and growth of our nation. Questions like “Who is free? Who is included? Who is equal?”- intentional questions which must be answered with each generation. These are questions that are considered within classrooms, military, workplaces, houses of worship, and playing fields. In our nation, what does it mean to be truly free, what does it look like to be fully included, how do we ensure that all are treated equal as was the intent from our nation’s founders? The apostle Paul’s twist on these questions took the form of encouraging “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things.” With that in mind, (slide 3) there was a stark rendition of the Statue of Liberty holding a basket of tomatoes, representing the work of farm laborers, with the words from poet Langston

Hughes, “I, too, am America.” I couldn’t help but wonder how many outside of agricultural areas understood the significance of such a piece. I pondered to myself, “How does focusing on the just, the truth, and the commendable play out when encountering those who are unlike us, when diversity, inclusion, and equity have now become banned words over God words, words Paul himself would have used had he been writing to us in the church today?” (slide 4) Lunchtime came all too fast and we took a short walk down Pennsylvania Ave. There, I noticed several people taking photos of a building whose identity had been stripped, but you could still faintly make out the etchings of what used to be – U-S-A-I-D, the former US Aid office, with the sign identifying its presence covered in black duct tape. It was curious to me the amount of attention it was getting from onlookers. It occurred to me that now, more than ever, the work of Week of Compassion which shows up during moments of suffering, crisis, and chaos in our world is an absolute necessity. (slide 5)

Our legacy as followers of Christ has been about such things from the very beginning. The apostle Paul writes to a community of faith in Philippi which still applies over 2000 years later, about the ethic of what it means to be Church in our society. He reminds us that since we have been on the receiving end of God’s all-encompassing ethic of love and liberation, we are called to be transformative agents whenever there is a threat to the well-being of others. During the days of Paul, being and doing Church in a broken world wasn’t an easy task for Christian communities. Suffering was the outcome of persecution, unjust practices, greed, unchecked power, and evil. So Paul encourages the church to reclaim the ministry of Jesus in this time and place and show up for those who are severely impacted by evil. No longer can we get away with saying, “Let the government take care of them” or “What can I do in the face of such suffering – my little contribution isn’t going to make a hill of beans?” Paul is trying to help transition the church’s vision away from what is wrong, harmful, and debilitating when the church becomes so obsessed, so overwhelmed, that it cannot function, and point it towards impactful ministries and energetic hope. That’s a tall order these days, but that is at the heart of the ministry of Week of Compassion, now in its 80th year.

Paul calls us to model what we have seen and heard from him, not just to highlight the severe things going on around us, but to create hope about how we might rise to the need being expressed. With the closing of USAID, Paul might ask those of us who seek to let Christ be seen at work in our lives, what is God inviting us to do in response to the suffering world-wide?

Our next stop was the African American Museum, a relatively new addition to the group of museums gathered near Capitol Hill. (Slide 6) The exhibit which peaked my interest was entitled “Making A Way” which laid out the varied paths taken to usher in civil rights for African Americans, overturning Jim Crow laws, and enabling property ownership, housing equity, family stability, desegregation, and worship accessibility. (Slide 7) Words from former slaves and civil rights leaders have been preserved for future generations so that this era in our national history will never be forgotten. Elizabeth Rose Hite remembers, “We had our own church in the brick yard way out in the field. We hid behind the bricks and had church every night.” Resistance in the ways Jesus practiced resistance against the powers that be is reflected around every corner in this museum. It becomes clear that the abolitionist and civil rights movements are examples of Paul’s words from Philippians in action. From a jail cell, Paul encouraged faithful resistance in the face of persecution and suffering, telling followers of Christ to see, hear, and respond to their realities, their respective circumstances, using Christ as their model. Paul, like Jesus, never called upon us to become walking mats in the face of evil but to stand in solidarity against forces which seek to dehumanize life, derail the mission of God’s church, and destroy the joy God birthed in Christ. (slide 8)

A story is told of a Christmas pageant in an Episcopal church where the manger was down in front at the chancel steps. Mary was there along with Joseph, the wise men, a handful of shepherds, and, of course, in the midst of them all was the Christ child, lying in the straw. The nativity story was read aloud, Christmas carols were sung at all the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the heavenly host of angels to arrive down front. At the right moment, the children all robed came forward and gathered around the

manger saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will among everyone.” Everyone followed the directions, but because there were so many of them, there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position around the manger. One particular angel, a girl about 9 years old who was smaller than the rest of the kids, ended up very far out on the fringes of things. Not even by craning her neck and standing on her tiptoes could she see what was going on. The angels all sang on cue, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among everyone.” Then in that momentary pause that followed, the small girl on the fringes electrified the entire church by crying out in irritation and sadness at having her view blocked, “Let Jesus show! I can’t see Jesus, let him show!” While the whole congregation sat in stunned silence, the rector did one of the best things he had ever done in his ministry and closed the service at that exact moment. He pronounced the benediction and told the congregation to go let Jesus show whenever and wherever they could. (slide 9)

In focusing on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,” we are letting Christ show through our lives. Recovery, relief, resettlement, and inspiring hope is what God calls us to do in the face of suffering and persecution here and abroad. We have been gifted with a lasting legacy of those we have heard and seen, who have shown us paths of resistance and creating justice for the well-being of others. So let us see, hear, and act in new and life-giving ways, letting Jesus show, and remaining confident that the model and method of Christ’s mission still works even today. May the God of peace indeed be with us all, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Amen.