

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 18, 10th Sunday After Pentecost/ The 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 91, Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

THE WINDOW AND JESUS

As many of you know we started the summer with the stained glass window of Jesus missing from the front of the sanctuary. This allowed the window to be cleaned for the first time since it was installed over 50 years ago in 1968, and the frame holding it in place was repaired.

The first Sunday it was missing some of our children came into church and saw the blue Styrofoam up in the window space. They asked several people if we were going to watch a movie during church. I think that was a great question for such a change in our worship space.

Having the window missing has taught me several things, and has gotten me thinking about others. First, I realized that you as the congregation, and I as your pastor, have a very different experience of the window.

I very rarely see it during Sunday worship.

You look at Jesus reaching out to us throughout the entire service.

The only time I'm turned toward the window is when I'm turned to hear one of our choirs sing or ring, and my focus is more on them than the window.

What I've also learned is that the stained glass window is an important part of worship for many of you, and you have missed it while it was gone.

I've had conversations with people this summer about what it means to them to see Jesus reaching out to them when they arrive in the sanctuary.

Others have talked about the way they feel Jesus blessing them,
or welcoming them,
or comforting them,
or understanding them as they sit in this sanctuary and look up at the window.

I was also reminded of conversations I had with some of our Togolese members during a new member class over ten years ago. I remember some of them asking me why we had a picture of Jesus in the church.

They explained to me that in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Togo there are no representations of Jesus in the sanctuaries.

It was a big difference for some families as they found ways to explain our stained glass window to their children.

There are many ways we each see this window that is now back in its place.

As the summer went on, and we kept looking up at the blue Styrofoam glowing in the morning sunlight, I began to think about all the feelings that came from having our picture of Jesus missing from our worship space.

The longer we were without the window, the more symbolism I found in the experience. It got me thinking about the things that happen in our lives that seem to block Jesus from our view, or make us feel like he is missing

I began to think of all the people I've talked with through the years in church sanctuaries, my office, hospitals, nursing homes and homes who have lost sight of Jesus and his open arms to them. I thought about times in my own life when things were happening that made it hard to see Jesus' arms open to me.

I've been thinking this week about that big blue Styrofoam up front being like the cloudiness that blocks to our eyes of faith sometimes.

Sometimes it is in seasons of grief that we lose sight of Jesus.

Sometimes it's when something horrible has happened in our life, or in the life of someone we love.

Sometimes it feels like Jesus is missing when we are healing old wounds and betrayals from the past, or new wounds and betrayals from just last week.

Sometimes its during a season of chronic or critical illness that we are experiencing, or a family member or friend is going through, when it feels like Jesus is missing.

Sometimes it is in seasons of depression that it feels like we just can't see Jesus any more.

Sometimes it happens when we are being bullied by someone at school, or by our partner or spouse, or by our parent or child, or by our employer, and it feels like Jesus isn't there.

Sometimes its events in the world, or in our country, or in our neighborhood, or in the daily news cycle that leave us asking "where is Jesus now?"

And sometimes there really isn't one thing we can point to, but we feel like we just can't see Jesus clearly in this season of our life.

The emptiness that many of us felt as we looked up at the big blue block of Styrofoam Sunday by Sunday, is the feeling of emptiness many of us have felt in different times and seasons of our faith journeys.

Unlike our stained glass window of Jesus that went away for a season, and is now back in place, the love of Jesus for each one of us does not ever stop or disappear.

Jesus' love especially does not stop when our eyes of faith are having trouble seeing him,
or our hearts of faith are having trouble feeling him near,
or our spirits feel like we are seeing blue Styrofoam instead of Jesus' love.

Faith in Jesus doesn't mean having clear vision all the time. I think its more true that sooner or later we all go through blue Styrofoam times, when we just can't see Jesus anymore.

It is in those seasons that I am so thankful for Paul's words that we have in Romans 8. They are words we need to hand to each other in the blue Styrofoam times. They are a gift from God for us to hold onto when we need to be reminded of what is really true, they are meant to be read over and over again:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

And we can add to that list, can't we? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will grief, or horrible things happening, or old wounds and betrayals, or new wounds and betrayals, or chronic illness, or depression, or bullying, or the daily news cycle, or our confused vision?

And Paul answers all our lists with a resounding no! "No, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. ...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,

nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, including our blue Styrofoam times, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is a promise for us to hold onto for ourselves. This is also a promise for us to hold on to for our family members, friends, and church family members in their blue Styrofoam seasons when their vision, their heart, their spirit is clouded by what is going on in their lives.

One of the greatest gifts someone gave me years ago, in one of my own blue Styrofoam times, was a friend who told me: “I know you are too tired right now to believe in Jesus’ love in this situation, so I will believe in his love for you. I will believe that he is sitting in this dark time with you. I will hold the light of faith for you until you are ready to pick it up again yourself.”

My soul was too weary to hear the promises of Romans 8--that nothing could separate me from the love of Christ--but I knew my friend believed it, and I trusted her. She held onto Romans 8 for me and the unstoppable love of Jesus for me until I could hold onto that faith again myself.

What a gift that we can come again and again to these words of promise in Romans 8, not only for ourselves, but for those people God puts in our paths who need these strong words of promise, and who need us to believe them.

I am thankful as well for the ways that our returned stained glass window shares its good news message of Jesus unstoppable love for us.

My prayer is that you will also feel that welcome and comfort and unstoppable love of Jesus in the Communion Meal we will share together today.

I love the mystery and the gift that Jesus gave us in this meal.

As we take the bread, and as we drink the cup, we are taking Jesus’ unstoppable love inside ourselves. It reminds us that the Living Christ lives in our hearts and lives and nothing can stop that eternal love.

In and out of the blue Styrofoam seasons of our lives, there is nothing that can separate us from the unstoppable, always-present love of Christ Jesus our Lord.

With thanksgiving that this is our good news I’d like to end the sermon with part of an ancient Irish Prayer known as St. Patrick’s Breastplate. Let us pray:

Christ with us,
 Christ before us,
 Christ behind us,
 Christ in us,
 Christ beneath us,
 Christ above us,
 Christ on our right,
 Christ on our left,
 Christ when we lie down,
 Christ when we sit down,
 Christ when we arise,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of us,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of us,
 Christ in every eye that sees us,

Christ in every ear that hears us.
We arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
of the Creator of creation. Amen.