

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Listen, if you would to this verse from Philippians and try to do so as if this is the first time you have ever heard it.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, beloved,^[e] 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, think about^[f] these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Does this verse describe our current life together? Our present age? Your state of mind. So much seems, as a young minister I know said, “just wrong” right now. So much of what bombards us from all sides is anything but true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. This verse from Philippians feels anything from quaint to naïve to an impossible fantasy.

There seems a race to the bottom, the nastier, uglier, more profanity laden and mean-spirited the more attention something receives and those of us shocked or offended find ourselves ever in reaction mode, often responding with equally shrill rhetoric or succumbing to simply turning it off or turning away, retreating until we can stomach emerging into the fray again. I hope this is not just me.

It is easy to feel a sense of overwhelming sadness or daily hand wringing around the state of our world. The opioid epidemic. The soaring rates of suicide. The headlines that have moved from climate change to climate crisis. Our own personal struggles with relationships, health, money. Violence, natural disasters, war, schisms.

Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy, thinking on these things is difficult when the cultural waters in which we swim are not inclined to such virtues. How often do we even encounter these words in our daily comings and goings? How often do we even utter them at church or in our own homes? Our lack of this vocabulary is taking its toll, not only on those of us appointed to speak the language of faith, but on our entire culture and world as well.

A young adult who just graduated from college, told me recently that he is not sure it would be ethical for him to have children in the years ahead. What with climate change and a global refugee crisis and seemingly endless wars, would it be fair to bring a child into a world such as ours? Not to mention the financial instability that comes with paying off student debt for years and not having health insurance once he's ineligible to be on his parents'.

I understood his point, but my heart broke a little at such fatalism in one so young. I wished he could have more youthful idealism but his generation, justice driven as they are, don't seem inclined to hopefulness.

He and his peers, and so many others, seek authenticity, purpose, community, ritual, all the things that faith offers and that all too often we are too embarrassed or cynical or reticent to share. We all are desperate for something more substantive than a hashtag, more thoughtful than a meme, more life-giving than a filtered, posed photo, more meaningful than clickbait, more tangible than virtual reality and more connective than our tribal bubbles.

We yearn for that which delights and holds true, what upholds dignity and prompts praise, what is truly just and honorable and holy. **I believe this with every fiber of my being and I believe it is our job as disciples of Jesus Christ to tell the story of the One we follow, to share unabashedly the impact of our faith, to live openly the greatest commandment to love God and our neighbors.**

If not us who? If not now, when?

People are killing and dying in search of the gifts we've been given to steward.

Tara Isabella Burton wrote in the New York Times on August 13 of this year an article titled, "The Religious Hunger of the Radical Right." In the wake of the shooting in El Paso she wrote, "It is impossible to understand American's resurgence of reactionary extremism without understanding it as a fundamentally religious phenomenon." She continues, "white supremacists and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists... fulfill the functions that sociologists generally attribute to a religion: They give their members a meaningful account of why the world is the way it is. They provide them with a sense of purpose and the possibility of sainthood. They offer a sense of community. And they establish clear roles and rituals that allow adherents to feel and act as part of the whole. They aren't just subcultures; they are churches. And until we recognize the religious hunger alongside the destructive hatred, we have little chance of stopping these terrorists."

Having witnessed the summer of hate in Charlottesville, I find her assessment sobering, but not surprising. The participants showed up in white passenger vans, dressed in matching shirts, had their motives been different they would have appeared to be youth groups arriving for a mission trip.

People are desperately seeking purpose, community, meaning.

Other, more positive groups, have become default churches, too. Harvard Divinity School students Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston studied this phenomenon and published their findings in a paper called, "How We Gather." They studied organizations like CrossFit and Soulcycle, noting that "As traditional religion struggles to attract young people, millennials are looking elsewhere with increased urgency. And in some cases, they are creating what they don't find."

They note that these organizations "**use secular language while mirroring the functions of fulfilled by religious community.**" They see six themes: community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, accountability. Does any of this resonated with you? With the Gospel? With your experience of the faith?

Religion reporter and host of the podcast "Preach," Lee Hale says this:

"People have so many reasons that they might not be walking into a church, and rarely is that reason that they don't care at all about God or faith."

<https://religionnews.com/2019/09/04/public-radios-preach-podcast-explores-religions-messy-side/>

Rarely is the reason that they don't care at all about God or faith, or community or purpose, or accountability or a better life and world. They, like all of us, long for that which is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy: LIFE GIVING.

Meanwhile other research reveals: "Only seven percent of Americans report talking about spiritual matters weekly. One-fifth of respondents had not had a spiritual conversation all year. Surely, self-identified Christians regularly engage in spiritual discussions with friends, coworkers, and family. Right? Sadly, only 13 percent of "practicing" Christians talk about spirituality once a week. **As a result, sacred conversations and words such as grace, gospel, God, salvation, faith, sin, and creed are much less common in our day-to-day experience.**" <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/jonathan-merritt-wants-to-reboot-religious-language-for-21s.html>

Jonathan Merritt unpacks this in his book, "Learning to Speak God from Scratch."

And if even we people of faith are losing words like “grace” and “mercy” and “faith” and “gospel” what are we replacing them with? If we don’t speak the language of our faith fluently, how will we practice it automatically and everywhere? How will we dream in the language of our scripture and envision a world accordingly?

What are the words that get readily bandied about as we live and move and have our being?

What do the billboards and the trending hashtags and the headlines reveal about who we are and whose we are and what we care about? What’s on your newsfeed? Your texts? Your lips?

I am willing to bet, whatever comes to mind, the Gospel story is better.

Proverbs tells us that where there is no vision the people perish.

Isaiah proclaims: so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

God’s words are performative. They do what they say: Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. My peace I give to you. Let there be light. God’s word creates worlds.

Jesus says: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

We need not be afraid. We are freed to live from a place of generosity and abundance, not fear. Perfect love casts out fear. Be not anxious. I am with you.

God says: You are mine, I have called you by name.

In life and death we belong to God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the Gospel truth, it is the Word made flesh, grace upon grace, holy, pure, commendable, just, lovely, excellent, praiseworthy and we are tasked, privileged, called, appointed to share it and **people are desperate to hear it, they are searching all over to find it, now is the time to proclaim it.**

Now is the time to be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel, to preach and teach in word and deed, using every medium and method available to us.

Theologian Jacques Ellul says that if Christians were the **salt and light and sheep among wolves** they are called to be their presence would be revolutionary, he wrote this in the mid 1960’s by the way.

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann says that our primary role in this world is to build an **evangelical infrastructure**, a Gospel, good news infrastructure that benefits everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Princeton professor of religion Eddie Glaude, Jr, writes that people of faith must **close the value gap between people**, making sure everyone is given the same opportunity to have abundant life.

Yale Professor of theology Willie James Jennings says that our **baptism ought to be materially manifest**, in other words, it ought to make a tangible, visible difference in how we live our lives, what we value and how we treat others. Our baptism should be obvious, our Christ clothing visible,

Womanist theologian Katie Cannon admonishes us to bring our whole selves, our whole stories, all of our experiences to bear on **doing the work our soul must have for the sake of the world God so loves.**

Jesus says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Scripture tells us: **You are stewards of the mysteries of God, a royal priesthood, scribes of the kingdom, the body of Christ, the household of God, the light of the world.**

We have been given the tools and the vision, the story and the commission, to shape the world around us in ways that reflect the character and will of our God to those yearning for something beautiful, delightful, and life giving, it is time we unabashedly shared the gifts we have been entrusted to steward.

And we begin exactly where we are, who we are, with whatever influence and skills we’ve been given, our faithful presence makes a difference.

Prayerfully.

Communally.

Scripturally.

We begin with whatever is TRUE, as in the way, the truth and the life. As in let your yes be yes and your no be no, as in speaking the truth in LOVE, as in not bearing false witness, as in accordance with the truth that is Jesus.

That means we say things like: I was wrong or I made a mistake or I misspoke or I assumed incorrectly. I am sorry. I confess, repent and seek to make amends and do better.

We might ask one another with humility: Does this action, word, post, reflect the character of Jesus Christ? We hold each other accountable to that standard.

We speak what we believe with courage and conviction, not as a means to shame others, but because, for us and our house, we choose God’s WORD and ways, no matter the consequences.

What is a TRUE for you? Undeniably, unquestionably true on account of your faith in Jesus Christ?

Ponder it. Focus on it. Pray about it. Notice how viewing the world through that truth changes your perceptions and opinions, your thoughts and your actions. The truth will set us free.

We have been called to be the salt of the earth so, we begin with whatever is HONORABLE: whatever evokes respect, whatever is above reproach, whatever is venerable, whatever is worthy, wherever and in whomever we see such things, focus on them, share them, point to them, name them.

Who are the people who embody this virtue? How can you emulate them? How can you be an example for others?

I have so many role models for what is honorable, many of them ruling elders.

A man named Bill Neal, who has had more than his fair share of loss and grief and yet exhibits a humble faithfulness that inspires me.

This past summer he sent a letter to the editor of both the Charlotte Observer and the Richmond Times Dispatch to be published on June 19, Juneteen, that date that commemorates the day enslaved people got the word of their freedom. He wrote:

Today, Juneteenth 2019, we honor the memory of the enslaved people who worked on the Neal farms and served in Neal houses in the 18th and 19th century Mecklenburg County, N.C.

Sadly, we know very little about them; we can't even say their names, let alone tell their stories, but what hope to someday.

For today, we do what we can, which is to remember their presence in that time and place, and to recognize the inherent worth of each of them despite the condition of their servitude.

That, my friends, is an honorable act and an example to me. When we yearn for whatever is honorable, we honor others in whatever ways we are able.

God requires us to do justice and we begin to yield ourselves to God's will and shape the world around us when we focus on and practice whatever is JUST

But first we must see clearly the injustice all around us. Know the history of your church, the land upon which your home sits. Read books by people who are not like you and books by people who are like you and have learned something you do not yet understand. Get to know those for whom this world is really, really hard.

I have heard that the way to truly know a culture is to ask people on the bottom of it how they are treated, the people Jesus made call "the least of these." How well do we know them?

A recent article in the New York Times detailed the death of Lamekia Dockery in a work release correction center in Indiana. When she arrived at the corrections center, she pleaded to go to the hospital. She told officials she was sick. She couldn't eat for the six days she was there and once she was taken to the hospital by ambulance it was too late.

The article reports:

"It would be a national scandal if people realized exactly how bad it was and how much abuse inmates are subjected to when they become sick inside prisons and jails," said William R. Claiborne, a lawyer in Savannah, Ga., who specializes in cases of inadequate medical care, such as one in which an inmate was told he was faking fainting spells, only to die of congestive heart failure. "The more marginalized that you are, the more likely you are to not be believed, the more likely you are to get denied care," Mr. Claiborne said.

The problem is worse, he said, for those already discounted by society: As a black woman and a drug user, Ms. Dockery was in that category.

...

Inmates said in interviews that Ms. Dockery begged for aid incessantly. Officially, she requested help at least a half-dozen times, according to internal emails and logs kept by corrections officers, which repeatedly noted her vomiting, moaning in pain, or even screaming. In response, she was punished with demerits and solitary confinement. When she kicked a door in protest, she was shackled.

...

Her family believes her cries were dismissed because of who she was: "She was a black woman, and they say she was on drugs, so they looked down on her," said Bertina Slaughter, Ms. Dockery's aunt.

"They didn't think she was worth nothing," Ms. Slaughter said. "But she was worth a lot to us."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/30/us/lamekia-dockery-death-jail-prison.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>

Ms. Dockery was **watched**, but not **seen**. Some people are observed and judged, but not seen or regarded. Too many are written off and deemed unworthy of being met as they are, as God sees them, sinners in need of grace, beloved children for whom Christ died, those for whom transformation is possible, promised even.

What does it mean to be just as Jesus is just? How do we do justice for Ms. Dockery, for the least of these, for Jesus?

We tend to Jesus' sheep when we focus on whatever is PURE

Whatever is holy.

Whatever reflects the character of our God, our God who chases us down with goodness and mercy. Our God who relishes creating. Our God who stops at nothing to be in relationship. Our God who gets really angry when the vulnerable are exploited. Our God who commands to love. How are we focusing and reflecting these things?

We walk humbly with God when we notice whatever is PLEASING

Or whatever is DELIGHTFUL. I like this translation. What causes you to delight? Where have you seen delight lately? When is the last time you simply played? Had fun? Lost yourself in something wonderful and, well, pleasing?

My middle child and I visited Scotland this summer and it was delightful, to be with her, to explore, to have no real agenda, no email. We decided to take the train from Edinburgh to Aberdeen, just to see the countryside, walk on the beach, wander.

When we got to the beach it was low tide and there was a man with a rake and a broom creating something in the sand. He had a small radio playing lovely music as he walked around in a circle, making lines with the end of the broom stick and intricate designs with the rake, circles within circles, arcs and squiggles in this pattern that got bigger and more complicated with each addition. He would stop and survey it from time to time, oblivious to the crowd that gathered above on the boardwalk. Just when I thought he was finished, he added another detail, it grew until it took up the entire area from shore line to sidewalk. He was utterly focused on his creation and I was utterly fascinated by it. It was pleasing. It was delightful to watch this person so totally engaged in something so utterly transitory. Once he was finished, he came up to sit on the bench near us and I told it was beautiful and I thanked him for it and even before we walked away the water started erasing his mandala in the sand.

I took a picture of it, but somehow it felt wrong to capture what was made to be so fleeting and, really, what I could not contain was the sensation, the feeling of pleasure this man both demonstrated and evoked through his creating and creation.

We live in a world enamored with measurable results and quantifiable impact and these are important but perhaps those of us who follow the Spirit that blows where it wills and we hear the sound of it, might also spend time being lost in wonder, joy and praise and inviting others to join us. Imagine how compelling that would be?

We strive for the kingdom when we speak the words the Spirit gives and preach whatever is COMMENDABLE

I did a little work on this word and it, like lovely/delightful/pleasing is only found here in all of the New Testament. It is what's known as a hapax legomenon, a word used singularly in all of the New Testament cannon, therefore we need to dig around antiquity a bit to understand more fully its implication and this one, friends, is most interesting.

This can be translated as “good report” and its most common usage refers to words. Carefully chosen words are commendable.

We who follow the WORD made flesh are to carefully choose our own words and give weight to those words of others that are carefully chosen.

In an age when four of the top thirty best selling self-help books on Amazon have profanity in the title, three with the “f” bomb, I think we disciples of Jesus Christ might consider bringing commendable, carefully chosen words back.

This applies to all our social media platforms, too.

Sam Leith in his book, “Words Like Loaded Pistols, Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama” writes this:

“Rhetoric’s effectiveness is, in the final analysis, independent of its moral content or that of its users. And this is one reason why the more good guys get clued into how it works, the better off we will all be.”

The world longs for God’s performative, creative, good word.

We love kindness when we begin with ANY EXCELLENCE, or any virtue, again a word study reveals this especially applies to exceptional *civic* virtue, those things that build up the community, that make for abundant life, that reveal our love of God through our love of neighbor.

Marc Lamont Hill in his book, “Nobody” says:

It now appears that our future will sustain prosperity for the few while a large, permanent class of people will live lives of destitution. Who will speak up for them? The sense that we all occupy the same community has been eroded...” (Hill, Nobody, page 173)

How do we, Presbyterians, long committed to things like public education and public service practice excellence? Civic virtue? Speak up for those living lives of destitution.

We demonstrate our love for Christ when we share anything PRAISEWORTHY

I recently read *Black Hole Blues and other songs from outer space* by Janna Levin. The recognition of how vast the universe is calms my anxiety over the immediate state of affairs, gives me perspective on the expanse of time and space and our tiny blip in it. It also reminds me that our blip casts sound waves that ripple and impact creation in ways we may never see or hear or know but can nonetheless trust.

There is a quote from Einstein in this book. It reads:

“The years of searching in the dark for a truth that one feels but cannot express, the intense desire and the alternations of confidence and misgivings until one breaks through to clarity and understanding, are known only to him who has himself experienced them.”

Sometimes it seems that a life of faith, that discipleship, is years of searching in the dark for a truth that I feel but cannot express, fraught with swings of confidence and misgivings, with moments, though, of sheer clarity, bright spots that burst on the scene, blinding, warm, revealing, and praiseworthy, so worthy of praise that even the rocks cry out. They all too quickly get sucked into the gravitational pull of the world’s black holes of chaos, cruelty, sin and evil. But the beauty of that light, the delight and glory of it, once experienced, will not let us go.

Having experienced the light of Jesus Christ, the true light that enlightens everyone, I can’t see the world the same way ever again. I can’t stop yearning for grace upon grace, truth, honor, justice, purity, beauty, good news, excellence, that which is worthy of our praise and seeking to help others know it, too. And the

awesomeness of having been called in some small blip or tiny ripple of a way, to tend to Christ's body and shape the world God so loves, keeps me doing this work.

Even when it is hard and the prevailing culture doesn't care. Even when it seems we are searching in the dark for a truth we feel but cannot express. Even when our misgivings overwhelm our confidence. Even when black holes abound, and bright spots are few and far between. Even then, especially then, Christ's promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church and his call to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Triune God and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded, resounds through the chaos and keeps me seeking to follow Jesus, compels me to meditate on and seek to practice: whatever is True, honorable, just, pure, delightful, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise.

This is our sacred call, our baptismal vocation, the joyous privilege of Christ's Body, the church, for the sake of the world God so loves, for such a time as this. The Spirit will give us the ability, God's Word will not return empty, Christ is with us, so Finally, beloved,^[a] 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, think about^[b] these things.

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“How We Gather” Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile <https://www.howwegather.org/>

Jesus Christ is the One through whom all things were brought into existence. Hebrews 1:10: "And: "You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands." This is quoted from Psalm 102:25 and supports the previous verse from Colossians. Verse 4 further substantiates that "Savior" refers to Jesus Christ. "To Titus, a true son in our common faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior." This gives a clear distinction between God the Father and Jesus Christ who is our Savior. And it shows that Jesus is also at the divine level of existence! Notice Titus 2:9-10 as well: "Exhort bondservants that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things." Commandments and standards. The handbook's name "Missionary Standards for Disciples of Jesus Christ" is purposeful in helping young missionaries, Holzapfel said. "The idea is: becoming more consecrated, dedicated disciples, wherever we are on the journey. We hope the mission will help them go further with their discipleship." The new handbooks emphasize that motives for serving as missionaries should focus on loving God and our neighbors, the two great commandments, without concern about specific outcomes or results. The handbooks also acknowledge that despite our best efforts to follow the missionary standards, a missionary may "experience trouble, sickness, or harm" (see John 16:33).