

Straight from the "Hart"

July 23, 2023



Sharing the journey
to know, love, and serve

Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the Hart". We are really glad you are here and participating in today's time of worship.

Affirmation of Faith

(P- Pastor, C – Congregation)

P: Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true church, apostolic and universal whose holy faith let us now declare: Do you believe in God the Father?



Donna Allmond (not pictured) Kathy Novak and Randy Bell play pre-service, offering, congregational, and post-service music.

C: We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, power, and love, whose mercy is over all his works, and whose will is ever directed to his children's good.

P: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

C: We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

P: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

C: We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ and find strength and help in time of need.

P: Do you believe in the Church?

C: We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Lord, as we present ourselves to you in worship, help us live in the tension between thinking we can do everything and fearing that we can do nothing. We give in faith

and with faith. O God, in the confidence that healing, hope, and wholeness will flourish through them and because of them. **Amen.**

ad. from © 2002 Herb Mather, General Board of Discipleship
in Worship & Song, Leader's ed.

Call to Worship

Reader: God's love, like rolling ocean waves, is never ceasing, yet ever refreshing. We have come to be delivered from cold hearts and wandering thoughts. We have come so that God will pour out his Spirit of grace and love, that we may be washed in the clear, calm waters of God's mercy and grace, that we may be made new, clean, bathed in the tides of his forgiveness. Come with burning enthusiasm and alert minds to worship in spirit and in truth. Let's sing



ad. blend of "Ancient Collects and Other Prayers" and
© 2009 Mark Parsons, both in Worship & Song, Leader's ed.

Music

O Church of God, United

Words: Frederick B. Morley, 1953 © 1954, renewed 1982 The Hymn Society of America
Music: Gesangbuch der H.W.k. Hofkappelle, 1784

1 O church of God, united to serve one common Lord,
proclaim to all one message, with hearts in glad accord.

Christ ever goes before us; we follow day by day
with strong and eager footsteps along the upward way.

3 Though creeds and tongues may differ, they speak, O Christ, of thee;
and in thy loving spirit we shall one people be.

Lord, may our faithful service and singleness of aim
proclaim to all the power of thy redeeming name.

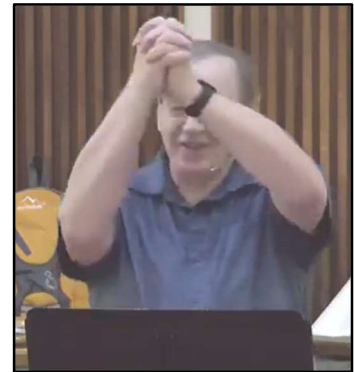
4 May thy great prayer be answered that we may all be one,
close bound, by love united in thee, God's blessed Son:
to bring a single witness, to make the pathway bright,
that souls which grope in darkness may find the one true light.

Theme Most of the New Testament writers see unity as a key to God's people succeeding in remaining faithful, and they spend a considerable amount of time encouraging their readers to act in such a way that unity will be advanced, and more people will join the believers. Let's quickly talk about a few vocabulary words and use the world of music to help us understand unity. When I first tried out for an

instrument, I chose percussion, and then I went home and my mom said “No.” 😊
 “You must choose an instrument that can play a melody line.” And so after a year of baritone, I play Tuba. We had about 2 melody lines a year and usually for only a small portion of the piece. There was one exception, a song called Tea for Two for Tubas. And it was in Marching Band and so the 4 sousaphone players had to get in front of the band and face the crowd and while we played we had to do a little dance as well. It was real fun!

The concert band required that we wear specific clothes: (boys wore black shoes, black socks, black pants, white shirt and black tie. Girls wore black shoes, I don't remember the rule on socks, black skirts, and white blouse. The marching band wore what you see in most marching bands, uniforms that were provided by the school, except as a sousaphone player I didn't get a plume because it would collide with the bell. – that feathery thing sticking out of the top of the hat —because it collided with the bell that came over the top of my head... Now the words of unity.

Unity – And that is the first word -- unity. Unity is when all the people come together to form a happy group that works together. [Congregation does with the pastor: Hold hands up hands with fingers wiggling (happy), and the wiggling fingers together until the fingers interlock and both hands become one big ball and then move the balled hands around together.] While doing these motions, the pastor repeats the phrase “people come together to form a happy group that works together”] (This will used throughout the service, but not with the congregation)



The choir or band unites to present the music in the best way possible, [repeat hand motions as you say:] so all those voices or all those instruments come together.

Uniformity – The second word is uniformity. That is one way we accomplish unity, which is achieved by *conformity*. Like I said, as band members, we all had to wear the same outfits or *uniforms*. Uniform means that as much as possible, we all looked alike, moved alike, acted alike, (or at least, in very strict regimented,

coordinated ways if we were shaping something in marching band) – it was a very specific “you must do it exactly this way”. And it brings a united front. We were to even lift our knees the same height, and sometimes double time so we all had to do that precisely together, so that we would all look like one united body. sounded In music, we call that *unison*). We all sing the melody line together. We may be an octave higher or lower depending on the range we are in, but it is all the same line going up and down together, and there are times for that, and makes the song sound good. There are times in life where unison is necessary and helpful.

But there are also times in music and in life when everyone being forced to conform to the exact same everything could make for a very bland and boring life. Just think if we all wore the same identical outfit as each other – every week in this setting. It would kind of get boring, wouldn't it? I remember a concert band piece that started with the tubas playing and holding a low F (imitate the sound) for about 12 measures, or more. Eventually other instruments joined in, probably about measure 4 or 5. The first time we played this, we played our F. There were 3, maybe 4 of us tuba players at that time. We played our F, and it was one of the very rare occasions that we saw our very serious band director smile, and then stop us because he was laughing so hard – because we sounded like a B-52 flying through. That was not the intent of the music. Can you imagine all of life being one constant drone, day in and day out, and everyone you see and meet has the same droning life and personality, always? And yet that is what some people seem to think is the goal of religion – to try and create, in the name of unity, some sort of identical cookie cutter mold into which every person must conform exactly to fit in, or they can't belong. So, in the name of faith, individuals are forced to conform or are restricted and stifled rather than experiencing the freedom to be transformed into who we are meant to be and want to become.

Harmony – And that leads to our third word: harmony. Harmony is achieved when we don't all play or sing the main song line together; but it all blends together into a fuller, more robust sound. That's how most of life is, or could be... We are all different, we have different likes and dislikes, we do things differently than each other. But when we can bend to blend it all together for a common purpose, we can make beautiful music together. So granted, Christians are to be uniform in the sense that we are all expected to love God and others – and many other basic core principles that we are hear about that flow out of that -- but we should also feel free how to appropriately express that love according to our own backgrounds, personalities, skills, gifts, and our calling.

When our marching band went to perform at away football games, before we got off the bus, the director would stand up in the front of each of those busses and say, “As long as you are wearing that uniform, you are representing our school, so act well.” And then he got off the bus and started smoking a cigarette (I don’t know about that)... he said we are to act our best so that people who were watching us would be impressed by our school, and those who were a part of the school system would be proud of how we represented them.

The Bible often talks about how we as God’s children are to be united [do the earlier hand motion] -- come together to form a happy group that presents how good it is to be with God and each other. We do that so others will be impressed with God and God will be proud of how we represent him. One of the keys to making God proud is by living in harmony, which is achieved by keeping in step with God’s Spirit and to let him weave us into one as we worship and work and play and live together.

Intro to and Bible Reading 1

Reader: In the New Testament, the word “walk” is used many times to describe the Christian life, -- a life of day by day, step by step, faith and obedience toward God. Just as, when we walk physically, we repeatedly obey a message from our brain to take a step, and we step out trusting that we’re going the right way, and in confidence that we can step safely, so it is in our spiritual walk. Some of the Biblical phrases are to walk by faith, walk properly (having good ethics and acting with good morality), walking in light, and in love, and in newness of life, and in Christ, and if we do, we will be united with each other. Paul tells the Galatians that living by the Spirit’s guidance and power will give no room for us to be recaptured by the power of sin, and he writes to the Ephesians that doing so unites us into the one faith under God.



(See Galatians 5:16, Romans 4:12, 6:4, 13:13, 2 Corinthians 5:7, Romans 13:13, Ephesians 4:1, 5:2, 6:4, 1 John 1:7)

But I say, walk habitually in the Holy Spirit. Seek him and be responsive to his guidance. Then you will certainly not carry out the desire of the sinful nature which responds impulsively without regard for God and his precepts -- so that you believers do not always do whatever good things you want to

do. But the fruit of the Spirit, the result of his presence within us, is: love [that is, unselfish concern for others], joy, [inner] peace, patience [not the ability to wait, but how we act while waiting], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature together with its passions and appetites. Galatians 5:16,17b-18, 22-24 (AMP)

I urge you to live -- to walk -- in a manner worthy of the calling you have received. Always be -- *or* -- Be completely -- humble, gentle, and patient, accepting [that is, putting up/bearing with] each other in love. Make every effort to preserve the unity, which is provided by and available through the Spirit who joins us together in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, and God called you to have one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. There is one God and Father of everything. He rules everything and is everywhere and is in everything. He is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1b-6 (EXB with slight grammatical modifications to make sense as an oral reading)

Special Music Our series reminds us that we are only temporarily traveling through this earth on our way home to heaven. As a reminder of this, we have set up imagery of camping, (and apparently it has encouraged a lot of people to do just that 😊), we have a lot traveling today, which is fine, I hope they receive a lot of refreshment as they go!) but the imagery represents our temporary home here on earth... For many of us, camping involves hiking or walking – which is best done in groups. Since earliest times, living with consistent faith in God, and living rightly, has been described as walking with God (as we just heard). In rare times such as the Garden of Eden, and when Jesus lived on earth, this included some kind of physical revelation of God’s presence. But most often, it is a spiritual awareness of his presence with us that significantly encourages us and affects how we live our lives.

In the reading we just heard, and the one that we will hear later in the service, we learn what the faithful walk, what our life, could look like when Jesus is with us. The Lord promises believers that he will never forsake us, that his presence will always be with us. This is a special encouragement to those who face struggles, persecution, and oppression because of their faith, such as the ones to whom Peter originally wrote. Our hymnwriter picked up on God’s promises and presence and power that enable us to faithfully walk with him in good times and bad,

because he is already walking with us. Listen as we sing, “Jesus will walk with me...”
ad. from wordwisehymns.com



Special Music

Jesus Will Walk With Me

Seasonal Singers

Words and Music: Haldor Lillenas, 1922

1. Jesus will walk with me down thru the valley,
Jesus will walk with me over the plain;
When in the shadow or when in the sunshine,
If he goes with me I shall not complain.

Refrain

Jesus will walk with me, He will talk with me;
he will walk with me; In joy or in sorrow, today and tomorrow,
I know he will walk with me.

2. Jesus will walk with me when I am tempted,
Giving me strength as my need may demand;
When in affliction his presence is near me,
I am upheld by his almighty hand.

Refrain

3. Jesus will walk with me, guarding me ever,
Giving me victory thru storm and thru strife;
he is my Comforter, Counselor, Leader,
over the uneven journey of life.

Refrain

4. Jesus will walk with me in life's fair morning,
And when the shadows of evening must come;
living or dying, he will not forsake me.
Jesus will walk with me all the way home.

Refrain

Music As Jesus brings us peace by his presence, he also encourages us to bring peace to others. Let's prepare our hearts for prayer by singing.

Let There Be Peace on Earth

Words & Music: Sy Miller and Jill Jackson, harm. by Charles H. Webb, 1987
© 1955 Assigned to Jan-Lee Music, © renewed 1983

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me;
let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.

With God, our creator, children all are we.

Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now.

With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow;
to take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Prayers Let's Pray. Our Heavenly Father, you sent your Son Jesus Christ, who had the riches of heaven but left it all behind to come to us to show us your peacem, your love and friendship and help. Help us to follow his example and make the treasure of our hearts what is truly important in life. Pour out your extravagant abundance on all of your creation. Provide for us things both physical and spiritual according to your will and promises. Help us to hold lightly the fading things of this earth and grasp tightly the enduring values of your kingdom. Teach us such generosity of resources and spirit and actions, that our legacy to the world will please you. That the spiritual gifts you grant to us may work in and through us to spread your gracious forgiveness, healing, help, comfort and peace. You invite us to hold the needs of our church family and beyond as dear to us as our own needs. We ask you to lighten our burdens and heal our spirits. We lift up the prayers for those burdened and seeking your help. **Petitions** * Pat Schleh requests prayers for two friends who will begin chemo soon. * and for daughter-in-law Joan who fell and seriously damaged a knee, * * Jan Martin requests prayers for the family and friends of Alex Bedenis, who died suddenly leaving a wife and 3 young children, there was a visitation this week and the funeral will be coming up soon. * The family and friends of Pat and Don Coleman's cousin Glen Sasse, who died from injuries in a motorcycle-deer collision, so we pray for the family and friends as they mourn this loss and they move into their futures, * We continue to pray for * For John & Lynett McCoullum, he has a bad case of melanoma, * and then their child David, as he recovers from very serious stent surgery. * Jan's brother Reese – and son Calvin * for Melville's friend Mark Harper was diagnosed with cancer (we dedicated

a quilt for him last week) * There are others not named who are on our hearts and minds and we lift them up to you as well. * We think of those who are traveling, we pray that their time away will be relaxing, refreshing, and meaningful. For those who are away for other kinds of duties, we pray that your presence will be sensed and felt by them as well.

Now pour out your strength and courage upon all of us, that we may be faithful stewards of the fragile bounty of this earth and that we may be entrusted with the riches of heaven as we strive to live as you taught us to pray... **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading 2

Reader: Richard Carlson reminds us to not sweat the small stuff, to learn to let little things go, and that they are *all* little things. (That's easy to **say**). But we also know that hanging on to grudges will fill *our* hands and *our* hearts, and gives *us* the burden, not those to whom we are aiming our hard feelings. Therefore, Peter quotes the Psalm that tells us crave, seek, and go after peace.

An expert in foreign affairs once criticized former Prime Minister of England Ramsey McDonald for his overly simplistic views of peace by saying, "The desire for peace does not ensure it." McDonald replied, "Quite true. But neither does the desire for food satisfy hunger -- but at least it gets you started towards the restaurant."



In a similar way, when we hear Peter's instructions on how to -- "just get along", it may feel overly simplistic. After all, many people have enough trouble achieving inner peace, much less positively integrating with others around them. Nevertheless, if we listen carefully, maybe it will move us toward what we hope our world can become. Peter was not simply waxing eloquent about some unachievable idealistic romantic notion. He fully expected that his instruction was practical and practice-able by God's people. After giving specific instructions in types of relationships where peace is easily lost, which we heard last week, he now gives more general instructions for everyone to apply in every situation, and we can accomplish it because of what Christ has done for us.

Finally, everyone must live in harmony, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love each other, be compassionate, and be humble. Don't pay people back with evil for the evil they do to you, or insult those who ridicule you. On the con-

trary, bless them, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

“Which of you takes pleasure in living a full life?

Who wants a long life to enjoy good days and see good things?

If you do, keep you tongues from saying evil things,
and your lips from deceiving talk; turn away from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do what he approves.
and his ears are open to their cry.

But the face of the Lord confronts those who do evil.”

Who will harm you if you are eager and devoted to doing what is good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Don't be afraid of the threats of those who want to harm you. Don't get upset. But dedicate your lives to Christ and revere him as Lord. Always be prepared to defend your confidence in God when anyone asks you to explain the reason for the hope you have. However, make your defense with gentleness and respect. Keep your conscience clear. Then those who treat the good Christian life you live with contempt and speak maliciously against your good behavior may feel ashamed that they have ridiculed you with their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing wrong.

This is true because Christ suffered once for our sins, the innocent person for the guilty so that he could bring you to God. His body was put to death, but he was made alive in the Spirit.... Now Christ has gone into heaven where he holds the honored position—the one at God the Father's right hand on the throne. Angels, rulers, and powers have been placed in submission under his authority.

1 Peter 3:8-9,13-18, 22 (GW, NIV).

Peter's quote (vv 10-12) is blended from GW with CJB's Psalm 34:12-16a which is the passage Peter was quoting.

Music Peter's message of last week continues this week. In dangerous times, for the safety and peace of God's people, his short-term goal is that they should make every effort to stay under the radar and not escalate negative conflict, especially with those who have a society-granted power to do *anything* they wanted with no repercussions. There was no freedom or justice for many of them. Peter's long-term hope, if Christ tarried, is that by this insistent good living under the heavy

hand of oppression, they would not only break the negative cycle, but they may also create a new positive cycle where their united love and service will entice more and more people to join the cause of Christ because of the gracious, loving, validating, identity-giving values that Christ brings to his people, (something most had not experienced in their culture) and a new kind of world could be created, so let's sing Together We Serve and then we will move right into the series responsive prayer and song that follows.

Together We Serve

Words & Music: Daniel Charles Damon © 1998 Hope Publishing Co.

1 Together we serve, united by love,
 inviting God's world to the glorious feast.
 We work and we pray through sorrow and joy,
 extending your love to the last and the least.

2 We seek to become a beacon of hope,
 a lamp for the heart and a light for the feet.
 We learn, year by year, to let love shine through
 until we see Christ in each person we meet.

4 Together, by grace, we witness and work,
 remembering Jesus, in whom we grow strong.
 Together we serve in Spirit and truth,
 remembering love is the strength of our song.

Series Responsive Prayer

with # 2223 (Ref only) They'll Know...By Our Love

Pastor: God has mercifully chosen us to be his people, set apart and equipped to represent his excellence.

C: Lord, as members of your kingdom, may we reflect your radiance while we live on this earth. Amen. (Inspired by 1 Peter 2:9-12, 2 Peter 1:3)

They'll Know We Are Christians By His Love

Words and Music: Peter Scholtes © 1966 FEL Publications, assigned 1991 to Lorenz Corp

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;
 yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love

Sermon Creating Harmony (in a world that Divides in the name of Uniformity)

An author summarized a popular philosophy this way: The universe is my servant, supporting me in all that I think and say and do and will meet all my needs immediately because it approves, loves, and is pleased by anything and everything

I do. With that thought, how can a person not achieve inner harmony?

The answer is: reality. If you have two people who believe the whole universe is supporting them above all and they have opposing points of view. It is like the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. It is hard to have inner harmony when we chase it by escalating a personal (sometimes selfishly narcissistic) agenda over against everything and everyone else that gets in the way of what we want the Universe to do for us.

Contrary to this, Mel Lawrenz wrote that he thought that one of the most important lessons we must learn is that the Live in Harmony Universe does not revolve around us, that we are not God [or exclusively supported by God (or the Universe) over and above everything and everyone else.]. When we believe in a God that is above and [beyond] us — it is then that we find help and hope."

And when we begin to realize that God is for all of us, not just me, myself, and I; then we can strive for true harmony [make the hand gesture described in the theme] -- not just within ourselves, but in our relationships beyond ourselves.

In a college softball game, this was quite a few years ago now, Western Oregon University was behind Central Washington 2-1. They had two runners on base. Senior Sara Tucholsky came to the plate and hit the ball over the centerfield fence, the first homerun she had ever hit, in college or in high school. But then in a freak accident, she tore her ACL as she rounded first base. She crawled back to the base. The rules state that if your teammates help you around the bases, you are called out. And if you send in a pinch runner, they start at the base the batter reached – which means that the homerun would become a single. But the rules didn't say anything about opponents, so Central Washington's first baseman and shortstop put Sara's legs under their arms and Sara put her arms over their shoulders and they carried her from base to base, stopping to let her touch each base with her good leg. The homerun counted and they won the game, ending Central Washington's playoff chances. [How different from the numerous video clips I have seen of present-day coaches and parents physically assaulting umpires and referees over what they assume is a bad call from what they say over 200 feet away.

As the trio reached home, the whole Western Oregon team was in tears, not because they took the lead, or won, but because of what had happened. Holtman (the opponent's first baseman) said, "In the end, it is not about winning and losing...

it was about that girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she deserved a home run." Western Oregon coach Pam Knox said "It's something I'll never forget -- the game's about character and integrity and sportsmanship, and it's not *always* about winning and losing." For them, it was about the vision of the game, the harmony of the sport that was bigger than either individual team or player or competition or success. Can you see that flying today? Not from what I've seen on the internet...

It may be "just a game", but it reflects an attitude that is important to how the Christian manages to run home. It isn't always about getting our way, it isn't about control, it is about contributing to a vision that is the best for all [make the hand motion here]. It is about that vision of what it means to be God's people here on earth - what spiritual growth and godly experiences we can help create for each other and beyond ourselves to others as well... It is about getting beyond me and what I do, beyond my team and what it does, it is moving forward the vision of God's kingdom and what it means for all of us to live as his people.

This vision moves us to seek harmony, to be eager to be good and to do good for each other.

Eager to be/do good (etb/dg)

Of course, the fear is that if we seek harmony, we will still be run over by a truck by those who haven't learned this, who are still living by the philosophy that they are the center of the Universe that supports me alone so I will feel good about destroying others who are in my way. Although perhaps expressed differently, this "new philosophy" is nothing new. Peter and his friends were experiencing it in his day, in real time in the Roman Empire, who felt the Universe was on Rome's side and supported and enforced it by deifying (claiming godhood of) its high-ranking rulers and emperors. Peter is well aware of the potential negatives of loving well and graciously in a cruel world that doesn't care how you love, or if you love.

He begins with a common-sense question that applies

(etb/dg) * because who would want to harm you

even in such a self-centered world, and this plays out of last week's message as well: We strive to be and do good because: Who would want to harm you if you are devoted to doing good? Generally speaking, if you are doing something good, you aren't getting in the way of people who are doing what they are doing. My experience is that people's fight fizzles if you don't fight back (generally speaking). The cliché is that it takes two to tango, but it also takes two to tangle. The proverb

says, “a gentle answer deflects fury, while a harsh [response] makes tempers rise.” (Proverbs 15:1 (CJB))

But humanity being what it is, even if we give all the perfect responses, it does not guarantee people will react in the way we

(etb/dg) because * Would you rather suffer for good or for bad?

hope. They may still threaten us with harm. Peter adds a second response. To put it in question form: We strive to be and do good because: If you are going to suffer, would you rather suffer for doing well, or suffer because you deserve it? Someone visited a friend in prison and went on and on about how unfair their imprisonment was. The prisoner responded, “Would you rather I was here for just reasons?” (That’s kind of a tough one to answer, actually.) Peter, in fact, says you are blessed by God if you suffer (not for receiving justice for bad actions, but) *for being obedient to his will*.

Peter adds to not be afraid of those who continue to desire to cause your suffering.

(etb/dg) because * Why be afraid?

Peter is referring to Isaiah at this point (Isaiah 8:11-13), where it says, do not fear what they fear -- and the idea is that God is warning the prophet not to be afraid of the popular opinion which was strikingly different from his own. Popular opinion can turn into pressured opinion, peer pressure -- which can become quite intense and even dangerous at times. In that context God is saying to Isaiah, “My strong hand is upon you, and the only opinion you need to worry about is my opinion.”

Peter picks up on that text to address his threatened readers -- in essence, saying: Don’t be afraid of their values, or what they might think of your values -- value God’s kingdom’s values, and focus on living that. Why do we need to be afraid of what they are doing if we are doing what is right and God’s strong hand is upon us?

And if we are going to live peacefully in a hostile world, that may lead people to ask why we are

Be ready to live the answer

different, because we don’t act like most people act. We don’t knock down a referee when we make a bad call. We don’t run people off the road if they cut us off.... hopefully. Peter’s advice is not about winning the cultural debate by proving ourselves right and them wrong. Finding fault with others is a popular trend these days. But Peter is about enticing and inviting and welcoming others by living faithfully and loving God and others in the midst of multiple sub-cultures, many of whom do look for harmony, but only looks for a forced conformity to its particular

cookie cutter version of life. And if you don't fit the cookie, they'll want to crumble you!

And in that environment, Peter says we are to be ready, by our confidence in God, to give a *gentle* and *respectful* answer with a clear conscience (by which he means, not with impure motives or personal agendas (for example, of manipulation or control) of our own attached to them. It is simply because we care and love).

An elderly man lay dying on his bed. He smelled fresh baked cookies coming up from the kitchen downstairs. He liked cookies. He gathered all of his strength and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and then hanging on to the stairwell handrail with both hands, with great effort he forced himself down the stairs.

He stumbled toward the kitchen and leaned against the door frame. The sight was breathtaking – hundreds and hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies laid out on the kitchen table. For a minute, he thought he was already in heaven. No longer able to stand, and with watering mouth, he crawled toward the table and reached up to have one those precious morsels. “One last taste of heaven on earth”, he thought. His shaking hand made it just above the edge of the table when it was smacked by a spatula. "Stay out of those," his wife said, "they're for the funeral."

I hope that is not a true story. But the point is, do we get so engrossed in our own activities and our own agenda and our own to do list that we forget what is going on in the lives of those around us? Too often we fail even with our family and friends, much less the culture around us. Can we stop long enough to consider, to be aware of something, from someone else's point of view? How can we give a gentle and respectful answer if we haven't taken the time to understand someone?

Many years ago, in the *Upper Room*, there was a devotional written by Nancy Eastridge, who wrote that she laughed when she saw a parrot struggling in vain to get from its perch to the cage floor, (one of those great big cages). She thought, “Strange bird, why don't you just fly [or at least, spread your wings and float down to the floor]?” She mocked it in her head. [That's what Christians do, they silently mock, they don't do it out loud, right? 😊 – I heard a comedian say that once.) The owner walked by, glanced at the bird and then glanced at her and guessed what she was thinking. He said, “The wings of parrots are clipped to keep them from flying away.” What she had imagined as a simple task was impossible.

She continued to watch as the parrot struggled in the most awkward positions,

sometimes upside down, grabbing whatever it could with beak, and claw; almost doing somersaults trying to get down and then finally falling and dazed on the floor of that cage. And she wrote that it wasn't funny anymore. The parrot was a symbol of all those people who on the surface seem that they are free -- or could or should be able to do whatever they wanted easily, but somehow their wings have been clipped by circumstances. And unknowing of the facts, we tend to stay on the sidelines and say, "Strange people! Why don't they just get their act together?"

If we are going to learn to appreciate and work with each other for the best of the whole -- [stop to do the hand motion]

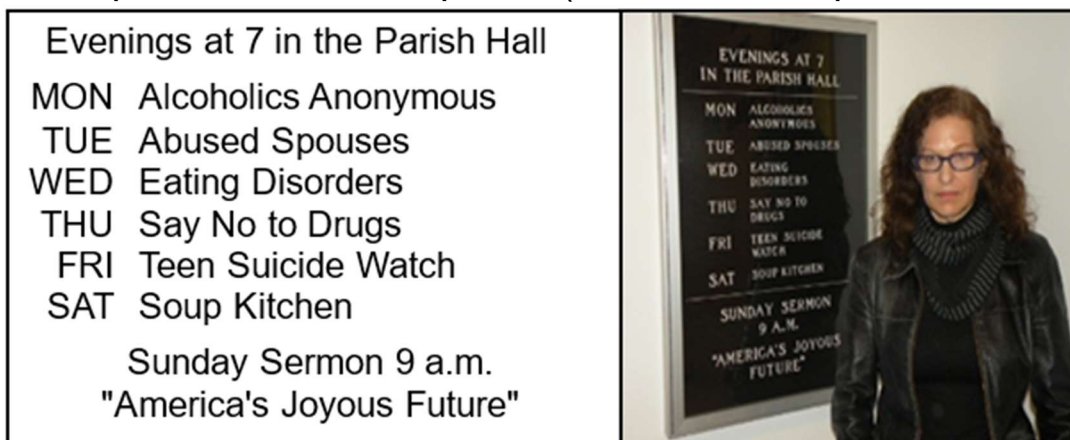
-- we need to take ourselves off of the throne of the Universe, and not see everything only from our own point of view. We need to look at what Christ has done for us -- innocent, but put to death, so that he could bring



us to God. Risen and gone to heaven, he rules over all, and has shown us the rule, the principle, of living life fully.

Honor Christ as Lord If we put Christ on the throne of our hearts, we will see life and others as he sees others and life, and we will look beyond ourselves to God above and people beyond, and we will end up making his world a better place.

Contemporary artist Erika Rothenberg took a small church bulletin board, many of us have probably seen them in some church somewhere with its aluminum silver frame and black velvety looking background and then you push in the white plastic letters and then you close the "glass" door. She used that to create an art piece. And the letters spelled out at the top of it: (see box in the picture below)



And that is what she entitled the work: "*America's Joyous Future*". And some people would see that artwork and come out and think... Well, what do they think? Do they see it as a judgment against people of faith who talk about pie in the sky happiness, oblivious to all the pain that is surrounding them? Or did they see it as a sign that God's people are making a difference by being deeply immersing themselves in human suffering, and by offering real tangible help and a future hope through Christ?

We show what our group life in the Lord can become as we recognize and honor him in his proper place above all creation... including in charge of our own lives -- even in the midst of the struggles that we experience and see around us. So let's do that. Let's create harmony in a world that divides and excludes in the name of uniformity.

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, forgive us for the times when our gaze gets so fixed on what is going on in our own life that we fail to see what is going on in the lives of others, especially from their perspective, or through *your* eyes. We lose sight of what it means to live in unity and harmony.

But you are the light that guides us in the dark and frightening places of our life. You are the hope that surrounds us when life delivers its worst. In every place we fail, you are present with grace and restoration. When all seems confusing, you are the one who speaks direction to our hearts and souls. And so, when all seems lost, we turn in faith to you and you, often through your people working together, lift and carry us, and through us, carry others home to victory through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Music It is faith alone in Christ that motivates us to act to receive his grace and live victoriously in his grace. Let's sing:

Let Us Plead for Faith Alone

Words: Charles Wesley, 1740 Music: Foundery Collection, 1742

1. Let us plead for faith alone, faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies, only faith the grace applies.
2. Active faith that lives within, conquers hell and death and sin,
hallows whom it first made whole, forms the Savior in the soul.
3. Let us for this faith contend, sure salvation is the end;
heaven already is begun, everlasting life is won.

Blessing As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart. Therefore, as we return to the world to resume our temporary travels on this earth, remember that every decision we make, every action we take, even word that comes out of our mouth is done in the name of the Lord who is with us every step of the way. Amen.

First line is Proverbs 27:19 (NIV)

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