

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN NOW....



Scripture:

Psalm 4

¹Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

²How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies? Selah ³But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

⁴When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Selah ⁵Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

⁶There are many who say, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!" ⁷You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

⁸I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

1 John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Our guest preacher is The Rev. Dr. Gail Cafferata, Priest Associate, at the Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa. Gail has been writing an important book on the results of research she completed about the experience for pastors and parishioners when a church closes. Her book: *Mind the Tiller: Pastoral Leadership for Closing Churches* will be published by Westminster John Knox Press. The Church of the Roses has had the honor of providing a quiet space for Gail to accomplish some of her writing. The book is sure to be an excellent resource to help churches navigate the murky waters of decline that is affecting the majority of churches globally.

Pastor Gail is married to Robert, a retired biologist. They have two daughters, and three grandchildren, two in the Boston area, and a year and a half-old grandson in Santa Rosa. Her book title comes from her love of sailing with the Santa Rosa Sailing Club on Spring Lake and San Francisco Bay. She also enjoys hiking and camping with her family.

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN NOW

Good morning! I bring you greetings from the Church of the Incarnation, brothers and sisters in the faith that unites us. For "We are God's children now." By faith and the blessing of the sacrament of Baptism we worship the same God and Savior Jesus Christ but in different traditions.

THE FAITH WE SHARE

Thank you very much for welcoming me into your tradition this morning and for your ministry of hospitality during the week. Some of you might know that for nearly a year I have been writing and revising my book in your church, and will be until the early fall when it is due at the publisher. I am deeply grateful for this quiet sacred space to write about the church and the faith we share.

We share faith because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. At the time of Jesus only the Jewish people called themselves God's people. They did because God offered a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai. "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession of all peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Moses and the people swore yes, and nothing can break that covenant. The Jewish people still are God's treasured people. But when the world was still running amok with sins and suffering Jesus came among us to broaden God's covenant. "We are God's children now."

God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning to defeat the power of death and forgive the sins of all who repent. Jesus came among us for a reason, to end our "warring ways" and melt our stony hearts with love.

A REIGN OF MERCY, JUSTICE AND PEACE

The author of today's letter to the church says, "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him."

What a Godly goal to strive for! Imagine the reign of God in our world.

- No missiles or gun violence,
- A home for every homeless person,
- Schools that educate our children well and keep them safe,
- Affordable health care,
- A justice system fair to all,
- Abundant food and
- Energy that preserves God's precious creation.

It would be a reign of mercy, justice and peace.

Yet we know the reign of God is God's hope for us, and not a present reality. "Answer me when I call, O God of my right! ... Be gracious to me and hear my prayer" sings the psalmist in the face of suffering. Today you and I may suffer through the sins of others. More importantly, we may also fail to be the person our neighbor needs us to be. In the words of Walt Kelly's Pogo (and here I am dating myself), "We have met the enemy and he is us."

CLOSING A CHURCH

I'm writing a book because I was blessed to be the pastor at Holy Family Episcopal Church in Rohnert Park. Over nine good years together we had helped to establish a vital ministry for the hungry in our city and a community garden that served twenty-six families, but the congregation had not grown, the roof leaked and we couldn't afford a new roof. We closed in Easter season 2012. At the time I didn't know anyone else who had closed a church. I felt I had failed. What does it mean to be a child of God when we fail? When we feel inadequate and unworthy as I did? I needed to find out what it was like for other pastors. That is what I have done for the past five years.

THE PERSON GOD IS CALLING US TO BE

The author of this letter, John, may say in this portion of the letter, "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him." In truth, he doesn't believe it. He writes earlier in the letter (1 John 1:8), "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive

ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Now that speaks to my reality and maybe yours. Nonetheless John also testifies “We are God’s children now!”

I am here today to testify that being a child of God means that God is never done forming and re-forming us into the person God is calling us to be. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, every mistake, every “woulda, coulda, shoulda,” is an opportunity to learn and become more and more the authentic, loving, just person we hope to be. Being a child of God means freedom to walk out of the darkness into the light, out of despair into hope, out of death into life.

By the grace of God, I have interviewed pastors in five different Protestant denominations who lived through the challenge of dissolving their congregation. The reasons were many—property issues like ours, lack of energy, their town or city dying, neighborhoods changing, or some other reason like internal conflict breaking their congregation’s bonds of love. I asked them how their church came to close, and then I asked them, “How have you changed as a result of your serving the church that closed?”

PEACE BE WITH YOU

When I interviewed pastors about 1-3 years after their churches dissolved, a few were still overwhelmed by feelings of guilt or betrayal and one or two said, “I’m more cynical about the church.” The good and amazing surprise I had was that nearly all had become the people Jesus called the disciples to be as he returned to them in Jerusalem a few days after Easter. Can you recall the story in Luke? The disciples were hidden away out of guilt and fear they would die too. Like me, they feared the worst. Then here comes Jesus with good news!

“Peace be with you.” “Why are you frightened? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Looking at one another they can’t believe it. Peter denying Jesus three times or the others running away from the cross or even some of the other selfish thoughts and deeds they had before his death, all are forgiven. They are free. “Peace be with you.”

Then Jesus teaches them. He opens their minds to understand the scriptures, that his life, death and resurrection fulfill God’s promise of a Messiah to save the children of God from the sins of others, and from their own.

Then Jesus calls them to be witnesses, to proclaim the gift of salvation to all nations. From this time on, Jesus needs them to strive to be brave, humble and loving children of God.

THREE PASTORS’ STORIES

This good news to the disciples is good news for us too. It was good news to the pastors who told me their stories. Let me tell you about three of them.

STORY #1: One pastor was a young church planter was determined to build a new church on a youth ministry alongside the historic congregation. Crisis after crisis arose with the surrounding community, and with the aging mother church. He told me:

My biggest lament is I think it is, you know, being too much of a lone ranger, I think. You know I had kind of this false sense of confidence that, I mean I had a confidence that I could do this, that I was going to make it happen. I had to prove something. I was newly ordained and if this ministry failed then I failed, and so I was not going to let that happen. So, I think I could have, had I not been so committed to my success, I would have made different choices very early on.

He expressed gratitude for his new call and said, “It’s a weird phenomenon when you’re not trying to prove yourself. That’s when God takes over and God does the proving to you.” He has confidence “that God created me as a unique, creative child of God, that God’s desire for me is to become fully human in that I’ll not be answer man, the one who gets it all right. I want to be as authentic as I can be ... it’s a call to authenticity. It’s a call to be fully human.”

STORY #2: An important theme in their responses to the closure of their churches is the opportunity to become authentic—more humble, honest and hopeful. One pastor who had served a church in conflict among themselves and with him said: There's not a lot of feel-good directly from that time. I think the blessings are a longer term ... A deeper experience of grace, some exposure of my shortcomings and flaws being driven deeper ... into the grace of God, and into dependency, and into, therefore, gratitude and joy and freedom. You know that's a walk I still daily seek and struggle to live out, but it's more of an unmasking the false self and living into my true self in Christ. So that is a great blessing.

STORY #3: Another pastor in his wisdom said, "Sometimes we fail. It doesn't mean you're a failure, it just means you failed. ... You cannot be defined a failure, until your life is over. Don't stop trying. Don't stop fighting. Don't stop taking the risks. ... If you're not failing, you're not taking risks. If you're not taking risks, then you're not really sharing the gospel like I think we're called to do. This is not a safe job that we have. It should not be a safe job that we have. It should be dangerous and risky, and a lot of mystery."

THE PEACE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

These pastors, others who have closed churches and, I pray, the people in their congregations are living into Jesus' promise of new life. "Peace be with you" as you own your mistakes. Study scriptures and pray that you may understand everything that has been written about our Savior Jesus Christ. And go into the world to witness "these things."

As for me, I have experienced the peace of God in Jesus Christ. I know there is new life after death. Like the disciples, I went to the cross and witnessed death. In the silence of my heart I encountered the risen Lord with fear and trembling. I have experienced God's mercy and compassion on my journey.

With a true and lively faith in Jesus Christ, many of the churches that dissolved were vital to the end. They encountered storms on the way and in the midst of them they loved one another. They lived with awareness of God's presence on their way and resurrection hope of new life after the doors would close. They attended Bible studies and book studies to deepen their faith. They were faithful in worship and giving until the last day. They went forth in peace to love and serve the Lord. To me, this is what it means to be the church. It's the beloved children of God on a journey with their Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

WHAT IS GOD'S CALL TO US?

Today, what is God's call to us? Turn to Jesus. Seek him in word and sacrament. Love one another. Some things you do will die. You will be sad. You will grieve. But whenever and wherever you follow Jesus risen from the grave you will know "We are children of God now." "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." Alleluia, the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!



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