

Stewards of Grace, Repairers of the Breach
Galatians 5:13-14, 1 Peter 4:8-10
ASP Commissioning Sunday
June 10, 2018
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

First, the bad news. We ordered up this weather especially for today because the current forecast for the week of June 17th in both Harlan and Knox Counties is sort of like this — at least a 40 percent chance of thunderstorms every day. The good news is, forecasters don't really have a clue what it's going to be like a week from today, so we live in hope.

Okay that's not the really good news. The really good news is that the weather will not make or break your week in Kentucky. The good news is that rain can't wash away compassion; it can't drown the grace that comes from opening yourselves to care about and, in your work, care for the women, men and children you are going to meet in Harlan and Knox Counties.

The two passages selected for today, passages about the Great Commandment, about hospitality, grace and service, were chosen because they were passages written to people in the midst of conflict. In 1 Peter, the churches in what is now modern-day Turkey were experiencing some of the very first oppression of Christians by Roman authorities. The egotistical, short-tempered Emperor Nero found a scapegoat for many of the things going wrong in his empire in this new sect with adherents popping up all over the Mediterranean, and so persecution had begun.

For the folks in Galatia, the conflict was internal. The congregations were made up of two kinds of followers of Jesus — those who had been Jews like the first apostles who continued to see themselves in that way, but as Jews who followed the Messiah, and those who had not been born Hebrew and did not keep the Jewish codes about food and circumcision and the like. Some said you had to be a good Jew first to be a good Christian, but Paul had said, no, both were legitimate ways to follow Jesus. The fight was about who was in and who was out, or should be.

Today, we live in a world filled with its share of conflicts — internal conflicts and external ones. We live in a nation that is sharply divided not just politically, but socially, economically and racially. And we live in a nation where some groups experience their lives as oppressive. Some are oppressed by hatred, some by addiction, some by economic forces beyond their control. But into all of these places of conflict scripture today speaks a word of hope and instruction: Love your neighbor. It's the number one rule of life. Also, share the gifts that you have been

given; see yourselves as blessed and to be a blessing. To love someone, you have to know them and be concerned about the conditions in which they live.

Those of you heading into Harlan County are going to be staying in the heart of one of the most infamous counties in the nation. It's infamous for the century of strife associated with the coal industry. Twice in the last 100 years, Harlan County has been a place where violence erupted between the coal miners and those who employed them. In the 1930s they called the conflict the "Harlan County War" where miners who had been laid off due to the collapse of the coal market in the early days of the depression had begun to turn to a radical union created by, of all people, the Communist Party of the United States. Their regular union had abandoned them and in desperation they turned to this new Union, and the coal companies, the police and the National Guard were called out to suppress that movement with violence. In the end, a number of officers and a number of workers were killed.

In the 1970s the workers were again suffering from a downturn in coal and terribly unsafe conditions. The Harlan mine owners opposed new safety regulations and health care coverage for black lung and other conditions common to mine workers, and another strike was met with violence from scabs and security teams hired by the mine companies. In both cases, at the end of the day, the workers were no better off. Is it any wonder, after 100 years of up and down and mostly down in the coal industry, they would hear a message of hope in promises from some political leaders who promise that coal can come back despite all evidence to the contrary?

But the people you will meet in Harlan County are not simply one more chapter of woe in a century of conflict; they are flesh and blood women, men and children with hopes and dreams, each bearing the image of God. They are not victims to be pitied; they are neighbors to be loved. And that's true in both Knox and Harlan Counties.

One of the great gifts to each of you who will be going to Kentucky next weekend is that you get a chance to explore your own gifts and talents and the gifts of those who will be on your teams and at your sites. Maybe your gift is hammering; maybe it's the math of the length of each piece of wood you'll be cutting; maybe it's making friends with the children you will meet (that would be you, Jay, among others); maybe it's playing cards and doing chores back at where you'll be staying. Regardless, it's a great thing to figure out that each of you brings something special and uniquely yours into the mix and together you and God will combine all of those gifts for the work that you have to accomplish.

Phillip A. Sharp knows a thing or two about the combining of gifts and talents to create a powerful force to get work done. He is a geneticist and molecular biologist at MIT who was one of the folks who discovered how to splice RNA sequences

back in the 70s and has been engaged in battles against cancer and HIV his entire career, trying to find ways to use genetics to treat and cure those global scourges. The team he collaborated with on RNA splicing won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1993.

Today, Professor Sharp is part of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research at MIT, one of the landmark research facilities fighting cancer in the world. The thing about the Institute that makes it so special? Half the researchers there are from the world of medicine, but half are from the engineering sciences. And they are collaborating, finding new treatments, new devices, new systems to treat, cure, and prevent cancer. Amazing things are happening at the Institute because people with different gifts are coming together, doing what they do well, and together making something they could never do on their own. Sounds an awful lot like what you will be doing starting next weekend, doesn't it?

You should know that Professor Sharp didn't just stumble over this idea of cooperation. He learned it on the dairy farm where he was raised in northern Kentucky and it was something he learned to put in practice when he, the first of his family to go to college, headed south to the little town of Barboursville to attend Union College in Knox County — the same Union College where half of you will be sleeping every night. You will be sleeping on the campus where Sharp first learned that the lessons about collaboration and working together, that he came to know on the farm, worked in the fields of science and mathematics as well.

Today, he uses the gifts God gave him to make the world a better place, even though he won't see the long-term impact of his work in the lives of patients. But he nevertheless is inspired to share what he can and trust that, in the end, lives will be made better one patient at a time.

In a similar way, your week in Knox or Harlan County is a time when you will see some concrete things about what you accomplished in the way a room or roof or porch is transformed, but you can never know what long-term impact your time there is going to have — how a kind word to a harried mother, or a compassionate ear to a dad whose extended family is struggling with addiction issues, or a few minutes a day of listening to and playing with children can change them and you in subtle, healing ways that can make a big difference long term.

The history of Harlan and Knox Counties is proof that they don't need heroes swooping in with new ideas to help them conquer difficult situations. They've been through that not just in the 1930s and the 1970s, but even a few years earlier, in 1921 when a group of business leaders from across the country gathered in Chicago and developed the "American Plan" — a multifaceted economic system emphasizing free markets, individual contract, management control, nonregulation of business and vigilance against "unsound" or "radical thought."

The miners in Kentucky were told by outsiders from Chicago that the “American Plan” would lift all boats; that the wealth it created would ultimately be good for all; that they should have patience. And what they got was the depression, black lung disease and decades of violence and hopelessness.

This time, when outsiders from Chicagoland go to Kentucky, may it be with a different spirit — a spirit that has long defined the Appalachia Service Project; a spirit that doesn’t seek to fix anyone, but to use the gifts that each person has so that homes are warmer, safer and drier, and so that hearts too are warmer. It’s a spirit using the words from today’s texts that is reaching out neighbor to neighbor; a spirit that knows that those who travel south and east do so with a lot of privilege, but also with individual gifts and talents that will be offered not out of any superiority, but in our common call to freedom from the things that divide us into a unity of compassion — a compassion that can heal any breach that divides us from others and a compassion that makes us stewards of God’s grace, the greatest healing force humanity has ever known.

Go with our prayers and God’s blessing. Use your gifts together to be a blessing. And when you return, when we are united, let us together consider how that is not a one-week-a-year way to live, but the course for a lifetime — as those who are blessed to be a blessing; who love in concrete constructive ways because we have been loved by one another, but most importantly by the one whose breath gives us life, whose grace gives us hope, whose peace can transform the world. Amen.