

Rev. Lisa Schrott
October 12, 2025
Isaiah 43:1-7 & Romans 14:7-9
We Belong to God

Our second scripture this morning comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Paul wrote Romans towards the end of his missionary career, and in this letter he addresses a number of theological issues, including what it means to be a follower of Christ no matter what your prior background and what it means to be freed in Christ – to be justified and made righteous and thus be confident in your salvation. In his commentary on Romans, Biblical scholar Michael Joseph Brown says, "Salvation transforms the relationship between human beings and God and also between human beings and themselves. This transformation arises out of gratitude for the 'mercies of God.'"¹ Hear now these words of God's mercies from Romans 14:7-9:

For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God.

In his book *Start with Why* (that would be w-h-y), Simon Sinek shares the power of beginning conversations about new products, programs, and movements with the "why" behind the idea. From Apple Computers to Harley Davidson Motorcycles to the Wright Brothers to Martin Luther King Jr., Sinek argues that those who could articulate why the world needed the product, program or movement far succeeded those who began with the details of "what" and "how." After all he says, Martin Luther King Jr. gave "the 'I Have a Dream' speech, not the 'I Have a Plan' speech." King spoke about what he believed and "people heard his beliefs and his words touched them deep inside. Those who believed what he believed took that cause and made it their own. And they told people what they believed. And then some organized to get out that belief more efficiently."²

We are beginning our Stewardship season this morning with the "why." Why do we collect an offering each week? Why do we ask for volunteers to help out with service projects? Why do we ask you to complete a pledge card about your projected giving and a Time and Talent sheet about how you will share your gifts and skills? The simple answer is also a deep answer. The reason is that **We Belong to God**, so our treasures and our gifts are not our

¹ Michael Joseph Brown. Romans. *Theological Bible Commentary*. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Peterson Eds. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009; p381.

² Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Portfolio/Penguin; 2009; p.126-130.

own. That *we belong to God* is our comfort in times of difficulty. It is our encouragement when life is challenging. It is the instruction book for how we live our lives. It is marching orders for serving our neighbors, the community and the greater world. Over the next five weeks, culminating in Dedication Sunday on November 16, we will explore what it means to Belong to God through the details of our mission statement. This morning we look to scripture and church history to help us understand why this claim of belonging is so important, how it has shaped people through the ages, and how it shapes us today.

Our First Scripture reading this morning was from the prophet Isaiah. As Jeff read, the prophet is speaking words of comfort and hope to a people who are dealing with a present reality of being uprooted and trapped in a situation of hopelessness and despair. Isaiah speaks about the possibility of becoming a new creation.

Isaiah is a book more than any other in the Old Testament that helps us imagine an alternative world, a world beyond the present reality; a world that looks different to those who are living the current reality of threats from superpowers or exile. Some of Isaiah's prophecies are about a world that seems idyllic: the lamb will lay down with the lion; there will be streams that constantly refresh parched lands and people. While the present reality of poverty, injustice and violence are visible threads, the language of new possibilities provides not an escape valve like a well-beloved and watched sitcom, but more of a hope for a world will God will intervene and there will be a new creation. We can dare to dream.

As one commentator has noted, "By reminding people of this world beyond the apparent one, the prophets hope to alter the way people look at their current situation, encouraging them to live differently.This act of imagining a world beyond the current reality is based on a deeply held conviction that God is able to transform a life filled with selfishness and self-interest into a world where people live according to God's will and follow God's word."³ This is why inhabiting the belief – of believing that *we belong to God* in the core of our being – matters. Because it allows us embrace the conviction that God is able to transform the world into a place where people live according to God's will and follow God's word.

The reading from Isaiah 43 is addressed to a people living in exile. As the commentator notes, "The notion of an alternative world becomes especially important in the exile, where people are living in the nightmare of being uprooted, trapped in a situation of hopelessness and despair. The prophets help people who have lost their ability to think of anything beyond their current situation of exile to imagine another world. In this world everything is possible." Why does believing that we belong to God matter? It matters because it reminds the people in exile that God will not abandon them. God will not give up on them. There will be a "new

³ L. Juliana Claasens. Isaiah. *Theological Bible Commentary*. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Peterson Eds. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p 217.

exodus” and a “new creation” and a “new community.” As Biblical scholar L. Juliana Claasens reminds us: “God’s actions cannot be curbed by what our limited vision deems possible.”⁴

For many of us living in the reality of what seems almost daily mass shootings, of economic despair exacerbated by government shut downs and tariffs, of violence and threats of violence ripping apart our cities, of beloved children of God being targeted because of where they were born and how they identify, Isaiah’s words are a comfort and encouragement: “But now thus says the Lord, ... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God ...” I have called you by name; you are mine. The claim that we belong to God is not initiated by us. It is a claim from God. Our responsibility is to accept this promise and live our lives with this understanding at its core.

In a similar fashion the apostle Paul is reminding those in the early church communities that no matter what the issues are that seem to separate them and divide them and bring contention to their gatherings, that all of that is noise. Because as a people of God they are not to live for themselves or die for themselves. Instead Paul says, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Later on in this chapter, the apostle Paul explains in more detail what it means to “live and die and for the Lord.” It is not about strict adherence to the laws for example. Rather as Paul says in verses 17-19, “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

Winning arguments about how one best follows the dietary laws is not the way to demonstrate that we belong to God in life and death. Belonging to God is not a competition, not a sport, not an achievement to lauded, not an occasion to diminish someone else’s value. It is instead an opportunity to pursue peace and for mutual upbuilding. This is what we need more of in our world today – peace and mutual upbuilding. And yet I also know the realities that we are facing make this such a challenge. It is hard not to have fear at the center of our being. It is hard to not make our life smaller and smaller by making the groups of people with whom we interact smaller and smaller, as our lives fold in on themselves in in anger and frustration and despair.

This same theme is played out in the opening of the Heidelberg Catechism that appears as the words of preparation in this morning’s bulletin. The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the documents in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions from the Reformation era. We often think of the Reformation as a point in time. But the Reformation was not a singular movement. As the introduction to the Heidelberg Confession shares: “Soon after Luther posted his ninety-five theses, reform movements sprang up throughout Europe. Tension between Lutherans and

⁴ Ibid p218

Reformed Christians was intense, especially over differences in the understanding of Christ's presence in communion. ... Acting to end the controversy, Frederick the Elector, ruler of the Palatinate, asked two young men of Heidelberg ... to prepare a catechism acceptable to both sides. The Heidelberg Catechism opens with two questions concerning our comfort in life and death. The knowledge that our only comfort is Jesus Christ frames the remainder of the catechism."⁵

In addition to being a wonderful teaching tool about our theology, the catechism's tone is pastoral. It doesn't sit in the controversy and animosity of the time. We may not appreciate the intensity of the disagreements today as we presently partner with our Lutheran siblings, but there was a time when the best that could be hoped for was peaceful coexistence between Lutheran and Reformed Christians. And yet today see that there has been a new creation formed. While the underlying understanding of the place of Christ in the sacrament of communion may still differ between those in the Lutheran tradition and those in Reformed traditions, here has been a transformation of the bitterness and animosity into shared ministry. A new creation. God's actions cannot be curbed by what our limited vision deems possible.

A people in exile, despondent and despairing as their home is destroyed by a conquering army. Christian communities forming with people of diverse backgrounds, backgrounds so divergent it seemed there was no way they could even share a meal together, let alone worship together. A splintering of the communities seeking to be "re-formed" closer to the image of Christ seen in scripture, rather than the traditions of the established Roman Catholic Church. In each of these situations, the path of least resistance was to conform to the ways of the world. To give into despair, fractionalization, infighting. To believe the worst about each other. To resist change that encompasses a welcoming, expansive spirit. To have limited imagination about the possibilities for a new creation to emerge.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind..." What does it mean to not conform to the world but to be transformed? It means that we understand that deep in our souls, deep in our hearts, in every fiber of our being that we belong to God. This is our hope. It is our comfort and solace in difficult times. It is how we bear the situations that give us grief. It is also our joy - the place where we find kinship with others. A shared meal full of laughter and appreciation for food cooked with love; a place where we let a piece of music infuse our soul - *All Things Bright and Beautiful* played by three of our youth - "the Lord God made them all."

Living with the belief that "we belong to God" at our very core means that as we live in our present reality, we celebrate the past events which help shape our present. Earlier this summer I shared a request for prayers for Bobbi Du Byne, one of the charter member of this

⁵ Intro to Heidelberg Catechism. PC(USA) Book of Confessions. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016; p28.

church. I have not had the pleasure to meet Bobbi yet, but I sent her a note. I received a note back from her last week and she asked me to share her gratitude to the congregation for the prayers, especially everyone who sent a card. She said, and I'm quoting from her note: "Tell them (that is you all, the congregation) when I see the names I think of what they added to our church to help it grow. When I think there were only 30 of us when we started our church ...". She ends her note offering us her thoughts and prayers. Talk about embodying our

Mission Statement:

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, we believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ.

That we belong to God is our hope, our comfort, our encouragement and it is the frame by which we are sent out to serve. It shapes our commitment to loving God and loving neighbor like participating in the CROP Walk to feed the hungry. Living with the belief that "we belong to God" at our very core means that are not limited or constricted by our present reality. It is because we belong to God that we can dream big dreams, that we can embrace the tenets of our Journey to 2030 vision to be a church that embraces welcome, intergenerational ministry and partnering with other faith communities and organizations. Next week following worship there will be an opportunity to hear more about some changes to way we organize our committee structure that will better allow us to live out our vision.

Living into these dreams, into our Journey to 2030 vision, is Holy Spirit work. It requires trust in God and trust in each other. It requires us to start with the "why" – that we belong to God. And when we live with that belief at the very center of lives, God's actions cannot be curbed by what our limited vision deems possible, to quote the Isaiah scholar L. Juliana Claasens. As we embark on the stewardship season this year, I invite you to remember to whom you belong and I invite you to respond abundantly as we expand our limited vision to embrace where God is calling us to dream.

And now I invite you to rise in body or spirit and join me as we share the Mission Statement of PCO.

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos,
We believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death,
We belong to God.

The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ.

Through Worship that glorifies God,
Study that seeks to understand God,

Service to a world that needs God,

We desire to build a network of caring relationships

Between families, friends, and strangers

By offering welcome, healing, justice and peace to all in the name of Jesus Christ.