

“LIFE TOGETHER: A COMMUNITY OF SHARED VALUES”

1 Corinthians 1:4-10; Colossians 3:1-2, 12-17

September 9, 2018

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

“Who am I?” That’s a question we grapple with from our earliest moments of understanding ourselves as individuals separate from our parents. How am I different? What makes me who I am? And ... what does that mean?

It’s the underlying question in our choices of what interests and activities to pursue, how to act, how we’ll interact with others. Sports or art? Hands-on activities? Books? Nature? Building things? Loud fun or quiet? Competitive or laid back? Fit in or stand out in a crowd? Optimistic or cautious?

A sense of who we are is made up of many things: personality, aptitudes, experiences, family culture ... all shape how we understand ourselves and what we come to believe and value. It comes increasingly to the fore as we make decisions about education, career, where to live, whether to marry or have kids, and so on. It’s there too at every life change and challenge: Who am I *now*, now that I’m an adult? ...or a parent, an empty-nester, unemployed, widowed, financially stable, disabled, retired, etc. At every point it’s important – critical, really. Because if I don’t understand who I am, I can barely say what I want or need, much less decide what it is I need to be doing.

Our minds and perspectives and even our self-understanding can change in lots of ways as we go through life, of course, but a stable sense of self that persists over time is the most basic foundation of personhood and emotional health. Probably all of us can call to mind disastrous decisions (our own or someone else’s) rooted in failure to understand or be honest about that question of “who am I?”

Something similar is true for a church as well. I get the sense that the question of “who we are” was significant for the Colossian church. In the letter to that early Christian community, probably written by Paul, you can hear the words encouraging them to claim their identity as believers, to live fully into that identity, to be who they are meant to be in Christ. They are raised with Christ, God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved. They are forgiven. They are called. They are one body. And that identity has implications for how they are to be with one another, how they are to live in the world, how they are to practice their faith, and even the attitudes they should cultivate. Who we understand ourselves to be matters.

I remember a long time ago hearing a former nun talk about how each of the Catholic orders of sister has its own particular “charism” or gift – nursing, teaching, or prayer, for example. I realized at once that this is true of any Christian congregation. As anybody who’s attended more than one church knows, congregations differ in more ways than denomination or sanctuary decoration. Every congregation has an identity of its own –

a bent toward and gifts for particular ministries and ways of being. Just as we are not all equally suited to be psychotherapists or roofers, salespeople or high school teachers, artists or police officers ... not all congregations are suited to every ministry. Every one has its own particular identity.

Sometimes that identity develops inevitably from circumstances or location: a retirement community, across the street from a college, membership made up of Spanish-speaking families, a large homeless population sleeping outside the door. Sometimes identity – or recognition of it – emerges from reflection, prayer, experience, and conversation ... as with the core values we here at Westminster put into words and into print several years ago. Many of you were part of the reflection that led us to articulate our core values: Inspiring Worship, Compassionate Service, Mind and Spirit, Arts and Music, and (added a year or two later) Earth Care.

Since that time we've held those five pairs of word with our Intention Statement and Welcome Statement as collective understanding of who we are in Christ, in the world, and in our life together.

We don't claim that these are the only values we espouse or even that this is the only way we could have chosen to articulate the things we cherish in our faith community. We certainly don't think they are better than what another church might come up with. Just that they express some of the key things that are important to us and define what is particular to us as a community of faith.

Now, I wouldn't say that all five of those core values are embraced with equal enthusiasm by all. Some of us, if it were up to us as individuals, might add or subtract from the list. But in many conversations and in practice, we found that what most of us said we loved and valued and considered important in our congregation's ministry tended to cluster around the values expressed in those five pairs of words. They express something about our *life together*... which is our worship theme for this coming year.

Let me just take a couple of minutes to lift up those core values, to remind us all of what they mean in our life together.

INSPIRING WORSHIP is the heart and soul of our life together. We are committed to worshipping God together in ways that engage our spirits and ready us to go forth to be faithful. We are committed to never letting it become just a routine going-through-the-motions.

COMPASSIONATE SERVICE recognizes that mission has always been central to Westminster's identity. We give dollars, food, and time. We partner with other local ministries, serve individually and collectively in the community, we connect with the larger world through advocacy and PCUSA mission. Compassion is key; we are not just do-gooder volunteers serving to enhance our self-image. We serve in the spirit of Jesus; we love our neighbors; we believe everyone is our neighbor.

MIND AND SPIRIT go together. We love learning. We believe in engaging with scripture and with the issues of the day. We value critical thinking and theology. But also we believe in prayer, in grace, in the presence of God in our midst. We try to stay open to mystery and to the things you can only know by heart.

ARTS AND MUSIC speak to us and reveal God's love and beauty in ways beyond words. They shine light on scripture and on life. They also provide us with different ways to express our faith, our questions and our praise.

EARTH CARE is a calling that has insistently claimed us over the past few years, as we have begun to take seriously scripture's mandate of stewardship and creation care, and recognized the many and growing threats to our planet. This awareness is touching nearly every aspect of our congregation's life, from worship and adult education to our building to our outreach.

I don't know about you, but I continue to cherish these core values and find them deep and rich and inspiring. I was also intrigued to notice, as I pondered this past week, the ways they seem to echo the values lifted up in that passage from Colossians (also in our anthem!).

But I want to also say a little bit about what it means for us as a faith community to come together around some core values. What do they do for us?

They help us to have a sense of shared identity that is more meaningful than a building, a location, a denominational affiliation, or a social group. They give shape and meaning and character to our life together. They also remind us that we are a community. Not just the sum of our individual parts (and values and inclinations). *Together we are more*. In Christ, we are more. We are not here just so that each one of us can get something that he or she wants. We are here to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We are here to care for each other. We are here for the joy of life together in community. And yes, sometimes that also means being here for the challenge and sacrifice of life together in community. A shared sense of "who we are" helps us to make that real.

That sense of identity goes hand in hand with purpose. Churches can easily fall into the temptation to see themselves as a nice group of people who feel like a family and get together once a week for a little spiritual refreshment. That's nice, but it's just not enough. It's not enough to qualify as *church*. It's not enough in the face of the spiritual challenges and human needs in our world. And it's just not what Jesus has called us to. Clarity about our values makes intentionality possible. We don't have to just drift along doing whatever is easiest. We have ministry to do, and our core values are like signposts pointing us toward it.

They also provide a ground to stand on for decision making in the same way a personal sense of "who I am" (or am not) guides individual choices. We can't do and be

everything as a church. Even if we were much bigger and more well-resourced, we couldn't. New ministry ideas come along all the time, and there has to be some basis for saying "yes, that might be a calling for us," or "no, that's not who we are." Core values help our leaders to discern – based on something more solid than personal inclination or current trends or cost effectiveness. They help us to focus our energies and steward our resources.

Our core values also reiterate the particularity of our calling, which is not about being "generic" Christians doing bland, generic, Christian things that interest or offend nobody. What's the good of that? Each one of us is a better, more faithful Christian when we bring and offer and engage our own true selves, and don't try to be someone we are not. That's true of congregations, too. Church folk these days tend to do a lot of comparing of one congregation to another. (They're so much bigger; we have better music; they have a great youth ministry; that church is cold and unwelcoming; that other one has so much more money to make their facility nice.) We ask, "why aren't we more like them?" or "why don't they do things our way, which is obviously better?" But the real questions of faithfulness ought to be "are we being faithful to who we are?" "Are we living out the values we claim?" "Are we using the gifts God has given us?" "Are we fulfilling what Jesus calls us to do?"

Like the Colossians, we are God's. We are holy and beloved. We are gifted and called. Each of us. All of us. That is the amazing, beautiful, grace-filled truth that grounds all the particularities of our calling, our ministry and mission, and our life together. To God be the glory. Amen.