



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
June 10, 2018 Sermon

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**In Ordinary Time God is With Us: Human Solidarity** Scripture Lessons:  
Romans 12:1-2, 9-15 and John 17:20-24

## Musee des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just  
walking dully along . . .  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course . . .

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.  
—W.H. Auden (1939)

### Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

We're now in "Ordinary Time"—that time in the church calendar, the longest time of the church calendar—when it is NOT Advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter or Easter Season.

Ordinary Time runs from now all the way to Advent, late November. During this time, Paul's letters to the early churches are a good read. In them, Paul's telling people what difference Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection make for their day-to-day lives, in ordinary time.

Listen now for God's Word, reading from Paul's letter to the churches in Rome Chapter 12 verses 1-2 and 9-15. Listen especially for the last verse, verse 15 . . .

### Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

If you're of a certain age, you might remember the English Comedy group Monty Python, and you might remember their movie, *The Life of Brian*, which was their satire of the life of Jesus.

Some called it blasphemous, but if you watch closely, it gets a lot of things right, right in line with what the Bible, that is. For example, that Jesus' disciples often mishear—don't get—what Jesus says. That happens throughout the Gospels. And in the movie?: "Blessed are the cheese makers'?!?!?" they ask in disbelief. "What on earth could he mean by that?!?!?"

If ever there was a passage from the Bible that people might not have gotten right, it's the one I'm about to read. Jesus is saying good-bye to his disciples—it's the night of his arrest—he's praying for them and for us, his future

disciples—praying that we might be one in him and the Father and one another, as he and the Father are one in one another and he is one in us. All for the glory of God.

What on earth could he mean by that?!?!

If I were to try to paraphrase what he's saying: it's that he's praying for a kind of solidarity—a *human* solidarity between us and God, through Him. I'll be reading from the 17th chapter of John's Gospel verses 20-24. Listen now for God's Word to us, the church . . .

Sermon:

It's a common human experience.

You come out of the memorial service and suddenly find yourself on once-so-familiar-but-now-unfamiliar ground—the church parking lot; you step out of the funeral home, blinking in the bright sunlight, as if you've never seen it before; you walk out of the hospital, and try to remember where you parked your car—which seems like a lifetime ago.

*Your* world has been turned upside down—and will never be the same again. But *the* world seems to be going right on, just as it did before, just as it always has: the sun shining, cars driving by, people going on with their lives. Just as they always have. It's this sense of isolation—from the world, from others, even from ourselves, or at least, from our past lives—that is the common human experience of grief and suffering: how can this be, how can all this *still* be going on, when what has happened, *has* happened?

That's the experience WH Auden is getting at in his 1939 poem, *Musee des Beaux Arts*. (I put an excerpt on the front of your bulletins)

Auden is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. He writes:

*About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters.*

(By "the Old Masters," he means the great painters of the past whose masterpieces hang on the walls around him.)

*how well they understood/its human position; how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just/walking dully along . . .*

The human position of suffering: how it takes place while . . . well, while the world goes right on about its business.

And then Auden focuses on a particular painting, Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

This is the Icarus of Greek mythology, who, wearing wax wings made by his father, the master craftsman, Daedalus, took flight with him to escape the island of Crete. But while Icarus was able to strap on his father's wings, he wasn't able to take his father's advice: "Don't fly too close to the sun," his father had said. But what boy could heed that advice, once he felt the wind beneath him and saw the earth below him?

What's striking about Bruegel's painting (you can see it in your bulletins) is that you can barely make out Icarus falling into the sea—it's far off in the far, far background. What you see in the foreground is . . . well, what you'd expect to see in the background: a traveler walking along, a ploughman plowing, a ship sailing calmly on to its destination, the world going on just as it always has. Did they even notice: did they even hear: the splash, the forsaken cry? Did they even look up, if only for a moment, to see the sun shining on the on the white legs disappearing into the green water?

That's what it's like when you lose someone. First, they're there, just like always, part of your life . . . And then . . . they're gone—like the ocean just swallowed them up . . . and now . . . only the unvarying, unyielding surface of the alien sea. And the world goes right on just as it always has.

About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters. Its human position.

Suffering isolates us, threatens to take *the* world away from us, and us away from *our* world.

Which is why—when you're suffering—the least gesture, the smallest word or act of human kindness—however formulaic it might be at other times—touches you, moves you, to tears even; It tells you that you're not alone.

Our customs ritualize this: the way, still, in many parts of the country, the traffic will pull over—or be pulled over—for a funeral procession; the way we stand and observe a moment of silence before the ballgame begins. Those rituals acknowledge both our need for—and the reality of—human solidarity. Yes, the world, our world—our games and our traffic—will keep right on going just as it always has. But we will stop for a moment—to remember you and your suffering. You are still part of us, part of our world. "I am human," the old Roman poet said, "nothing human is alien to me."

It's a strangely beautiful and powerful thing—human solidarity.

Back in the early 1990's, I got to hear the political philosopher, Michael Walzer, give a keynote address at a conference. Walzer had spent much of his career considering whether, to what extent, and how the meaning of terms—especially moral terms—could be communicated across cultural, linguistic, historic and geographic divides. Can I, being who and what I am, and living where and how I do today, really understand what an Inuit person living on Baffin Island north of the Arctic circle in the mid-19th-century meant by the word, "good." In the talk, there was much talk of meanings, thin and thick, minimalist and maximalist. But in the middle, Walzer interrupted himself to speak of the Solidarity protests in the Gdańsk shipyards in Poland: he spoke of seeing, on TV, the protestors holding up signs, reading, "Justice" and "Freedom." "Somehow, and in some way, despite all that separates us," Walzer said, "I know what they mean."

It's a strangely beautiful and powerful thing—human solidarity.

If only . . . If only . . . If only, it were a little more reliable.

**"What can I do?"** Four simple words—that run the gamut, from profound human solidarity to our complete lack thereof. Those words can be an eager, imploring even desperate offer of human assistance, "*What can I do?*" And they can also be an indifferent, shrugging, even inhuman unconcern: "*What can I do?*" It all depends on who says it, where and how. And all of us, at one time or another, have heard it, said it, felt it, both ways.

If only human solidarity were a little more reliable.

Which is why it makes all the difference in the world that God, in Jesus Christ became human, sought human solidarity with us. God's doing so shows that human solidarity is not just a sometime, every-once-in-a-while, nice-when-you-can-get-it kind of thing, but instead what lies at the very heart of the universe, what lies at the very heart of God. And it shows that we are right to feel those moments of human solidarity as holy: in those moments God is with us. And it shows that that other forsaken cry—that cry that gives voice to our common, human experience of isolation in suffering, Jesus's cry from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—it shows that that cry is for us. We are not alone in our suffering, even when we feel that way. God is with us. Reliably.

And that means in joy, too. Perhaps we're most aware of our need for human solidarity in our times of suffering because that's when we feel most isolated. But the need is there all the time, including, maybe most of all, in our times of joy. Think about it: when you find joy, when you experience something wonderful—you want to share it with others, or at least the better part of you does. "You gotta see this, hear this, taste this, read this!" we say to anyone who will listen. "Did you see that?" we scream after the great play as we high-five the complete stranger sitting next to us at the game. Somehow our joy is not complete unless we share it with others. Wherever, whenever, and in whatever we delight, the quantity of that delight is raised exponentially, its quality raised infinitely, when we share it with others.

I have seen men, grown men, strong men, powerful men, captains of industry, leaders in their fields, sitting, with their one-year-old granddaughters perched on their laps, playing . . .yes, peek-a-boo-I-see-you. [Act it out]. For hours on end. I tell you, I have seen it, and I know you have, too . . . in fact, many of you gray-haired guys out there . . . well, let's just say, "We see you."

What is peek-a-boo but a taking of delight, infinite delight, in the delight of another, in the very existence of another. It is a picture of human solidarity in joy, and in that human solidarity is joy—we are not alone. And we are right to feel those moments as holy. God is with us.

In the same prayer, the pray where he prays that he, his father, and all his people might be one, Jesus also promises that our joy will be made complete in him. That he will make it so. God is there, too, in our times of joy, sharing that delight, even the delight of peek-a-boo, with us.

**"Well, good for you."** Again, another simple, four-word phrase that can run the gamut from profound, feeling human solidarity in joy to a complete lack thereof. "Well, good for you!" meaning "I am so happy with you and for you." "Well, good for you," meaning, "I couldn't care less, but if I did, it would be because you don't deserve this."

This past Friday, I got to hear Jack Longstreth pay tribute to Lee Whitney at Lee's memorial service. Jack's tribute had a refrain, and it was, "Well, good for you!" It seems that, on several occasions, throughout their 60+ years of friendship, Jack and Lee would run into each other, unexpectedly, at some special place or event or awards banquet. And then the ritual: "Well, look at *you—here!*" one would exclaim to the other. "Do you know what *you're* doing—here?" the other would ask. "I have no idea," the other would respond. "Well, good for you!"

One time, not to long ago, Jack saw Lee, wearing a engineer's hat, driving that little train that goes around Carillon Park. "Well, look at *you—here.*" Lee shouted to Jack. "Do you know what you're doing—*here?*" Jack shouted back to Lee. "I have no idea," Lee answered. "Well, good for you," Jack said, and crawled into the caboose for the ride.

Sitting there, at the memorial service, we all knew that refrain was coming back . . . one last time. Jack is a master story-teller so we knew it was coming back one last time. And it did. "Well, look at *you—here!*" Jack heard Lee saying down to him, speaking down from heaven. "Do you know what you're doing—*there?*" Jack shouted back up to Lee. "I have no idea," Lee answered. "Well, good for you," Jack said, looking, pointing upward, "See you soon, Lee."

*That they may be with me, where I am, to see my glory.*

It was a beautiful moment. It was beautiful because, throughout their 60+ years of friendship, Jack and Lee had taken the indifferent, sarcastic meaning of "Well, good for you" and turned it into an expression of human solidarity, a deep expression of friendship, of delight in seeing the other and in being seen by the other—in the very existence—of the other. And it was beautiful because none of us deserves the grace we are given—but it is good for us, and we can delight in that together. And finally it was beautiful because, then, there, all of us at the memorial service, in that moment, as Jack said those words to Lee one last time, we all knew that in Jesus Christ, God was with us: in our loss and in our suffering, in our friendship and in our joy, God is with us. We knew that then. And it was beautiful.

In ordinary time: we are the church: one in him and the Father and one another, as he and the Father are one in one another and he is one in us. All for the glory of God.

It's a common human experience. In ordinary time—in life and in death, and in life beyond death—God is with us. In Jesus Christ, in human solidarity.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen