



## ***Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost***

*Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner*

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

[Psalms 71:1-6](#)

[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)

[Luke 13:10-17](#)

*Come, Holy Spirit. Gather us into unity, let us together show forth your power and light and love. Set us free from any shame of who we are and how you have called us. Let us glimpse again and again the fire at the center of city of the living God that is greater than any fire or tempest we face in our lives, and let that fire burn brightly in us. Help us to know and show your glory, through Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

Good morning!! Greetings, everyone! It is so good to be back with you after our months away on sabbatical. I am so grateful for the time and the opportunity to take the journey that Heather and I took. There is so much to share with you and the wider church and community. It will take time – there is so much we learned, saw, heard, and experienced, and we will begin week by week to bring you some of the images and insights. We have been deeply enriched. Thank you for the ways you held together, worked together, prayed together, and served together in this part of our world, while we were gone. I am so very, very grateful.

And many, many thanks to Revs. Holladay, David, Mary, and Glenda for their leadership and service during this summer. And to Ian, Dave, Michelle, Rod, Farley, Kate, Kristin, and all church members who contributed to moving forward. And to DeDe and Ty for their steady ministry in office and worship.

Today's scripture readings are striking in their showing us a glimpse of the power and majesty of God, and of what it is that we are invited to be part of in God's domain. It is also striking, how weak-kneed or self-doubting or stubborn we can be when we hear God call to us or see God at work.

So, from the letter of Hebrews, we hear, "You have not come to something that can be touched – [no matter how awe-striking!] – a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant." This is a vision of the realm of God that is not only heaven but encompasses earth. We are in the very presence of God and all the angels and of all who have gone before and of all who join in prayer and praise to God across all places.

The Orthodox churches we visited were often visual portrayals of this domain of God's kingdom. Entering into the nave and around the sanctuary, we were surrounded by icons painted on the walls or hung close together, taking up almost all of the space, with images of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, and of Mary, and of apostles and saints and martyrs through the ages – including local saints who were important in bringing Christian faith to this part of the world – and of Christ surrounded by people he was raising from the grave and leading into the holy dwelling of God. When we worship in an Orthodox congregation, we are surrounded with the reminders of the company of saints and angels that is all around us, in which we are a part.

What do you come here for? What draws you to this place? What do expect, hope for, yearn for in this place of worship, and from these scriptures, and at this table?

Friends, we are always in God's presence. There is no place we can go where God is not there. There is no place in our own hearts we can go where God is not present and a witness. So, we are always surrounded by and immersed in the majesty and power of God – inside and through us, and all around us, under us, above and behind and before us.

But we come together with a particular mindfulness and attentiveness each week, here in this little place dedicated to God, to open ourselves more fully to this presence. We come to open our hearts wide in prayer. We come to pour out our gratitude, and our joys and sorrows. We come to hear the living Word of God speak. We come to be fed by God directly through Christ's presence – to take Christ into our own bodies and be transformed more and more into the image of Christ and into the fullness of what God has made us to be. And we come to listen for and hear God's call to us, for how we shall live in this world.

This is for everyone. Everyone! No matter what your strengths or weaknesses, no matter what your age, your ability, your knowledge. You are part of this vast kingdom of God. And this – THIS – is your first and greatest citizenship. As it says in the book of Revelations, you are made "kings and priests to serve our God," unified with "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood."

Do not say, I am too young, or I am too old and frail, or I am too occupied as a mother or father, or I am too beaten down by life, or any other such thing. God is calling you – each one of us – across any lines or barriers that separate us from others and from our fullest selves. God is saying, "You. I am calling you."

Jesus crosses lines, all sorts of dividing lines and barriers, to speak this way to any one of us, and to any human soul. Across barriers and dividing lines between sexes, ages, health status, class and race and social or ethnic group. He does this today in the Gospel reading we heard – right there in the synagogue.

In our sabbatical journeys, we visited many synagogues and mosques. In these countries around the Mediterranean, the worship spaces were set for men and women to sit in different locations. Women were often in a balcony if there were two stories, or in an area behind a screen in the back on the same floor, or, in some synagogues, in an area behind the men who would be seated more toward the front and in a center area. Synagogues and mosques dating back 700 to 1200 years were arranged this way, and modern practice in mosques is still with separation of men and women. It is likely that such arrangements were expected and practiced in Jesus' day as well. My new best friend from North Macedonia (a story in itself!) loves to post short videos of himself in his mosque during Friday prayers, and there the imam either stands on the preacher's stairs or is seated in the teacher's chair in order to speak – and his sightline is consistently toward the men on the first floor, not up toward the women or back toward the women's screened area.

So, women might be unseen by religious leaders and those leading worship, and not sensed or considered much by the men gathered most closely.

Jesus deliberately crosses these lines of cultural habits and patterns. He looks out and sees the woman who is bent over. He is already crossing beyond the typical boundaries by choosing to look further and to see the women, and to see this woman who appeared "just then" as he was teaching. And then, he stopped what he was doing, and called her forward to where he was – at the middle space for teaching. So, he called her across the threshold that she and everyone else had been keeping in place, separating women

from men. Here she is, now, in the center. And there is no possibility of her being ignored or passed over. And then, Jesus speaks directly to her and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And finally, he touches her, puts his hands on her. Jesus has now crossed all the thresholds and lines and boundaries in order to draw this woman into God's healing embrace, and so that everyone can see a demonstration of how God loves and how that love levels the ground for everyone to come and have access.

This woman, and her frailty, become testimonies of God's love and grace and power and light. Because she responded to Christ's invitation, and stepped forward into a place where her living story was known and seen by everyone gathered in that place.

God is saying to each of us – each one of us – “I have known you from before your time began. I have appointed you.”

*“Ah, but I am only.... I do not know how to.... I am only....”*

“Shh. Shh. Shh. Enough of that.

“You shall go, you shall speak, you shall do, you shall gather, you shall break down barriers, you shall heal and mend, you shall build and plant, you shall free – you shall BE, in all that I call you to do, in every place.

“Be, child! Be!

“And call the world around you into being.

“I am living fire. You are light I have ignited. Be light.

“You are an image of my love, my power, my fire, my being. BE!

“I have work for you to do.

“It will not always be easy. But it will be right and good, and you will know in your gut when you sense my peace and power that you are in the right place for the right purpose.

“Enough with hand-wringing and shrugging and shaking the head. enough with hiding behind embarrassment and false humility. Dear one, I see you, and now I want you to hear me. You are free from your ailment. You are free from what has you bent over with the weight of the World and all that you carry.

“Lift up your head and your heart. Let them rise!”