

Prayer for Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing, open us to your life-giving word, and fill us with your Holy Spirit so that living water may flow through our hearts – a spring of hope for a thirsty world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, cloth yourselves...” - the opening words to today’s passage in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Paul is writing from prison to a specific community of faith with whom he had never met. It was a young church. We, here at Westminster, are nearly 170 years old and thanks to the Preserve the Pinnacle campaign, we look pretty good for our age, and we will soon look even better. The Colossian church was likely still in its infancy, learning how to walk together.

Already established must have been the individual’s baptism ritual of removing one’s clothes prior to baptism and receiving new clothes symbolizing purity after the baptism. It was a symbolic practice of removing one’s old self and practices while vulnerably approaching baptism to then be raised from the waters to take on one’s new identity: The old has passed away and a new life has begun.

Paul’s point in writing to the Colossian church was that, just as we individually pass through the waters of baptism, we are called to do the same as community. That old practices be washed away, that the body of the church be raised to new life. Clothe yourselves as a community. Westminster, part of what drew me to you was the way you, in Paul’s words, have clothed yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And this past year it has been a blessing to witness you, to lead you and to be led by you to let the “‘peace of Christ’ rule in our hearts to which, indeed, we are called in one body.”

Though, it is not always easy to let the ‘peace of Christ’ rule in our hearts. We have faced numerous challenges in this short year together. COVID continued to ebb and flow, impacting us individually and collectively. Your pastor and family faced their first Buffalo winter. Russia invaded Ukraine and continues to decimate

regions of a fragile country, and all continue to wonder where, how and if this ends. White supremacy emerged from the shadows and stole innocent lives of our black neighbors. Women's constitutional rights have now been eradicated, voted down by our supreme court - a court less supreme than our creator God. Yet, we are left to wonder what is next.

What is next for us? Just as baptized individuals clothe themselves to new life, we, too, must clothe ourselves collectively. Individual baptism takes on new meaning when practiced in community. Our collective body rises from the waters of baptism toward a community practice of putting on new clothes. With gratitude in our hearts, we will sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. Such songs are sung to praise our creator God and such songs are sung that we learn how to unite our voice together as one – in harmony with one another. Our beautiful, baptized individual voices uniting together as a collective voice, that our collective voice join in the songs of others: songs of love, songs of justice, songs of equity, of equality. Specific songs of women's rights, that black lives do in fact matter, colorful songs with and on behalf of our LGBTQ+ community. Songs for our climate and songs against gun violence. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs sung towards God's reign being on earth as it is in heaven.

And not in song alone, but in deed as well, doing all things through Christ. Over the past several months your mission leaders have gathered to reimagine a mission structure that collectively frees us to pursue, to chase after, to join alongside what God is up to in our community and beyond. Our voice shall rise from the baptismal waters but let us not forget our collective body shall rise as well, that we are to lovingly pursue justice not in word alone but in our action also. Through our mission structure you will be equipped to join alongside one another in joining

alongside members of our greater community. Not only will there be a place for each and every one of you, there will be a need for each and every one of you – a place (places) of belonging for you. We will partner with community organizations to interrupt injustices: there will be educational components, awareness events, opportunities for individual relationships, community relationships, advocacy alongside community members.

Through our Preserve the Pinnacle campaign we have invested heavily in East Buffalo. Through the use of remaining capital campaign mission funds Session approved a one-year, part-time position for a Director of Community Engagement whose task will be to bridge us into the community through connecting us with organizations who have like concerns, who work toward interrupting injustices locally and nationally. That we offer our voices and we offer our body as well as our funds. In addition to his Youth Ministry, I am excited to share that Pastor Micah Nutter-Dowling will take on this additional one-year role in the fall.

On a related note, earlier this year, fifty of you joined me in reading *Freeing Congregational Missions*. All of you should mark your calendars for the weekend of October 1 and 2, when we host the authors who will lead us in a mission focused and mission equipping weekend.

Imagine the mission structure I outlined as a skeleton. Borrowing from Paul's language, it is a skeleton in need of your flesh, your baptized bodies uniting together in word and deed. In closing, hear Paul's words: As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds

everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

Through the one who creates, who redeems and who sustains. Amen.