

Sunday, September 1, 2019

Isaiah 45:12-13

Romans 8:28-30

John 15:1-20

### The Spirit of God is Here and Leading Us!

It is certainly good to be back with our church family after a couple of weeks of vacation visiting family and the wonders of God's creation. As I've heard a few people say- it hardly seems possible but this is Labour Day weekend and the season is certainly changing. The sun is already setting between 8-8:30 p.m.! Yet as we know our lives continue on as we look to this week filled with anxiety, anticipation, wonder and excitement. Yet we have nothing to fear because God is with us and leading our lives.

Our last suggested topic for our "At Your Request" summer series, is a doctrinal topic focusing on God as creator and God's providence and what we might consider predestination. What does it mean that God is here and leading us? This seems like a simple question yet when we think about God's Spirit moving amongst us are we being told what to do emphatically and without reserve because we are believers or do we still have a choice? Was the plan of the world made up before the heavens came into being? Or is God's plan for the world ever changing because the world as we understand it now is not what God had envisioned for his creation?

Many of these questions might simply be answered by I don't know but as people of faith and wonder and belief we turn to not only God's word but to doctrinal statements of faith which have been discussed for generations within the Christian church and our UCC as well. With regard to these matters, the UCC Basis of Union's doctrinal statements state:

Article III. Of the Divine Purpose. *We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that, while the freedom of man is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory.*

Article IV. Of Creation and Providence states:

*We believe that God is the creator, upholder, and governor of all things; that He is above all His works and in them all; and that He made man in His own image, meet for fellowship with Him, free and able to choose between good and evil, and responsible to his Maker and Lord.*

But what does this mean? Divine providence refers to God's preservation of creation, his cooperation with everything that happens, and his guiding of the universe. While God cooperates with both good and evil deeds, with the evil deeds he does so because they are deeds, not with the evil in them. God wants to preserve creation including those part of creation he made called human.

As Isaiah wrote in ch.45 "I made the earth and created humankind upon it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens and I commanded all their host—meaning the stars, planets and everything contained. And God made people. It is this relationship between the Creator and people that we continue to explore and have been doing this kind of reflection since the time Adam and Eve first heard God's voice of instruction and how to live without sin. God made people to communicate with him and through time this communication has lead people closer and then further away from God, back and forth throughout history. But if we in our time and generation- right now- believe in God as creator what is providential is that God helps or intervenes to bring we humans back on track for us to fulfil and live out his plan for all of us.

Do we acknowledge that God has a plan for our lives? Or what randomness do we believe to be true for who we are in this moment- Was it by coincidence that you are sitting where you are right now; that you are here today and worshiping, or that you have received a feeling in this moment that something is different—or that there is a presence which is difficult to describe in your mind or coming from within? Was it fate that brought you and your spouse together many years ago? Or was it planned, or circumstance? All these words—fate, randomness, planned, circumstance refer to something being by luck as it seemed things aligned to enable it to occur. But if we believe in God and hearing these words of Paul in Romans 8:28 we might further wonder what this all means. Paul wrote: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." But do these words lead us to think that God is truly holding us and guiding us even though we can make good or bad choices?

But Paul continues "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called and those whom he called he also justified and those whom he justified he also glorified." Under this predestination are those who called to serve God determined before their birth and if this is the case is there hope for those who are not? What does it mean that God predestined those to become like Jesus? Has there been changes in God's plan since those days of creation?

Let's look at our world for a moment—climate change is real—rainforests are burning, icecaps are melting, places are heating up like never before; weaponry is running rampant amongst some citizens in certain countries; there are droughts and floods, famines, and abundant foods seeming to be out of balance. There is high immigration refugees and nomadic peoples on the move to where life has to be better. Was all of this part of God's plan? Or where did people choose this outcome? What are we doing?

Yet Paul continues and says not to give up because God glorifies the justified; he justifies the calls, and he calls his children to be conformed in Christ's image, that is to be like Jesus. And how are we to be like Jesus? According to John, we are to bear fruit, to abide in Christ, to have Christ's teachings in our hearts so that we can ask for what we wish and it will be done. We are called to be Christ's disciples and by doing this we must keep his commandments and love. For if we do these things, we will be fully complete with joy.

Is it providence that we are here today? Were you determined to be a faithful follower of Christ? By faith I pray that the answer is yes to both of these questions. But maybe just maybe what we are in need of is reassurance that we are God's alone and that through His providence we are kept in the circle of indemnity that is we are safe and secure from outward harm.

Tim Wesemann tells a story about God's providence that he calls, "The circle of Indemnity." One cold winter day in Denver, Colorado, while people were absorbed by the activities of life, a backdrop of snow and sleet fell to the ground. As the people of Denver went about their daily routines, one woman was focused solely on her child. Today was the day she was taking her newborn baby home from the hospital after a longer-than-usual stay. Shortly after birth, the child had open-heart surgery. Although the doctor probably didn't have to tell her, he reminded the new mom to be extra careful with the fragile child.

She buckled the newborn safely in the car seat, got in herself, locked the door, put on her seatbelt, and drove toward home. Icy rain and snow accumulated on the roads. She turned into Interstate 25. The wind picked up, blowing the snow across the road, making it more difficult to see. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel and glanced in the back seat at her newborn. The windshield wipers moved in fast motion. Squinting and tense, she noticed something unusual ahead. A car had skidded out of control and was turned sideways. She was headed straight for it. She reacted quickly and slammed her foot on the brake. Her mind was on her frail, postoperative child as her car slid, heading

right for the car in front of her. They slid down the interstate and stopped only inches from the other car. No impact whatsoever. Inches from a collision that could have been life threatening.

Before a sigh of relief could be released from her lungs, she noticed a semi-truck barreling down the highway and skidding right toward the two cars stuck in the traffic lane. She heard the brakes of the truck squeal as it jack-knifed and slid toward her car. The front of the truck stopped less than a foot from the hood of her car. And the back of the truck surrounded the other end. Again, no impact—at least for her vehicle carrying the frail baby. What occurred behind the truck was a 60-car pile-up. Cars crashed into the truck and into one another. It was one of the worst accidents the city had seen. But there, at the front of the heap was a car carrying a newborn baby recuperating from open-heart surgery.

As the media descended on the area, a reporter interviewed this mother. She told the reporter, "It was like I was in a circle of indemnity." Her remark invites us to picture a crude-looking circle made by the jack-knifed truck and the car that surrounded her vehicle. She was safe and so was her fragile baby.

We have choices and decisions to make throughout our life. As infants we are encouraged to walk at a young age; to talk words and phrases in order to express our ideas; and then as we grow older we learn by various means how to do these same things more effectively. But as we grow we also make life decisions, with regard to education, socialization, and everyday life. When we reflect on this circle of indemnity this woman and her baby had—one must believe in God's providence. And whether she was a Christian before that time we don't know. We do know that she lived a Christian life after and raised that baby to know God. Not only out of gratitude for the surgery that first saved the baby's life, but because they lived through a horrendous car crash.

But what about you? As you face new challenges this week or next, is there a circle of indemnity- God's providential spirit around you? Are you one of his chosen who now chooses to grow in your faith because you have experienced His Spirit? As we prepare for the challenges ahead- are we willing to seek Christ and be grafted upon the vine which gives eternal life? Are we willing to bear fruit by telling others of God's Spirit because of our faithful commitment to him? God's Spirit is here in this place and time leading and guiding us. And God's Spirit goes with you wherever you go, guiding and leading you because you are God's children in faith and believe in his Son Jesus our Saviour. Let us remember this as we share together in prayer.

God you call us to believe yet you know who we are and everything there is to know about us. Help us to realize the depth of your knowledge of this world and all that is occurring in this moment. Yet you hear our words and receive them in love and with hope. We pray that your Spirit will always lead and guide us. And as we offer our lives and the concerns of what this week might bring we pray that your Spirit will surround us, guide and protect us for we are your faithful branches who need you and love you. Hear our prayers we ask. SILENCE Amen.