

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 22, 2021**  
**Genesis 1:1-2:25, Luke 18:15-17**  
**“Welcome” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

I love the video of the creation story that we watched this morning. It is a wonderful blending of imagery, music and narration that draws us into the wonder of the creation story. I hope that the video pulled you into the prose of the story, because that was what the story was written to be. The story was likely written during the Babylonian exile in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE by a scribe who wanted to give the people a story of hope and comfort. It was a story that would remind them of their God so they wouldn't lose faith.

Today, I don't want to wrestle with whether the story is scientifically accurate, because that was most likely not the intent of the scribe in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, I want to think about the God the writer presents in the story. Who is the one the writer wanted the Hebrew people to remember. Obviously, God is a powerful, creating God. From no form or void comes light and dark, day and night, land and water, birds and animals, and finally humans. What kind of God would do that? Why would God do that?

Thankfully the Bible gives us some clues. First, the creation story is the first story in the Bible. It sets the tone for the rest of the Biblical story of God's relationship with humanity. What we know is that all that God created was good. Everything that was needed for this new world to thrive was given. Why did God do all this? The end of the creation story points to us. God desired to create a world that would include a creature created in the image of God and who God would enjoy a relationship with. You could say that God created the world as a gift of hospitality. This idea is supported throughout the Bible, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

After the two creation stories, the relationship between God and humanity grows and takes shape. God establishes a covenant relationship with Adam and Eve that is carried on through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and becomes codified with Moses. Hospitality is at the core of this covenant. In fact it is mandated by God. God tells the people to care especially for the widow, the orphan and the alien. Alien doesn't refer to creatures from outer space, but to people from other countries. This is vitally important for the Hebrew people who have been exiled from their homeland and made to be aliens in other lands. This is the root of the Golden

Rule – do unto others and you would have them do unto you. Throughout the Bible you'll find the mandate to care for the widow, the orphan and the alien, for you yourselves were aliens.

This theme of welcome or hospitality was modeled for us by Jesus. He taught the disciples that when we take care of others, we are taking care of Jesus. He was very clear that caring for others is our responsibility, it is our part of the covenant relationship with God.

This morning I am excited that we can once again welcome one another to Sunday school classes. For the first time in over a year, we will have classes meeting in person. Our adult and youth classes will be able to include friends online through Zoom. The links for the classes went out in the worship announcement on Thursday, but are also available on our website and in the bulletin announcements. We hope you will join us. Everyone is welcome.

But that's only one reason I am so excited this morning. Today we are launching classes for children and adults using the brand new curriculum from the PCUSA called Follow Me: Biblical Practices for Faithful Living. This is a curriculum uniquely designed to study what Jesus did, said and embodied. We will look at what he said and did and why he said and did them. That means this won't be just a New Testament study, but a study of the breadth of the Bible. It will also take a look at the things that Christians have routinely done over the centuries to practice their faith. Our pre-school, K-5/6<sup>th</sup> graders, and one of our adult classes will be studying these lessons together. Today they will begin with the creation story and God's welcome to us.

Christians have a long history of practicing hospitality. Christians were actively involved in providing hospitality to Black Americans escaping slavery in the American South through the Underground Railroad. Christians have provided assistance to immigrants coming to America for generations. Many congregations today are busy welcoming the hungry to enjoy meals, visiting those who are sick or imprisoned, and working to change laws and practices that exclude and marginalize people. <sup>1</sup>

These sound like wonderful ways to care for others, but there is often a challenge inherent in them. They require us to care for people who are not like us. Mitch has shared a story with you about a church that faithfully fed the homeless in their community, but struggled to welcome the homeless to worship on Sunday morning. We knew a pastor who served a congregation that included a number of Latinx immigrants. When it became known that some were illegal because they didn't have the money to pay the legal fees for the immigration process, some wanted to pay for legal assistance. Others became angry that the church would

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<sup>1</sup> Follow Me: Biblical Practices for Faithful Living. Congregational Guide

help someone who was there illegally and left the church. These issues are complicated; but Jesus constantly reminded his followers that hospitality is not just about welcoming people who are like us. He repeatedly got in trouble with religious leaders because he ate with tax collectors, he spoke to Samaritans – especially a woman. But Jesus understood that hospitality is about welcoming all people: friends, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies.

There is an old children’s song that captures foundation of why we welcome others. It’s based on 1 John 4:19-21 that says, “19 We love because God first loved us. 20 Those who say, “I love God” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don’t love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! 21 This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.” Since we aren’t able to sing as a congregation, I’m going to ask you to be the percussion section. If you know the song, you can clap loudly. It goes like this...

We love XX

because he first loved us (repeat)

We love XX, We love XX, We love XX

because he first loved us.

Now we’re ready for Sunday School! Amen.