

“Present”
1 Timothy 4:4-10; Romans 8:14-28;
Luke 12:54-58

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Sometimes at the beginning of a class the teacher will take out a notebook and start calling out the roll.

“Jeremiah?”

“Present and accounted for.”

Shall I go on? I don't normally take attendance. Even the pew pads we ask you to fill out aren't really an attendance form. You're not going to get extra points for filling it out. It's helpful to us to keep track of things, but it's not attendance. It does let us know you are present.

I was thinking about that. What does it mean to be present, to be present anywhere, but particularly to be present in worship, to be here and accounted for. It's one thing to say, “I'm here.” It's one thing to say I'm here when my body is here but sometimes the rest of me is off somewhere else. Sometimes it's hard to forget something that happened to me during the week or during the year, even. I can be so tied up with remembering something or thinking about something that has happened that I'm not really here. Or, I can begin to think about something that is going to happen. I begin to think about a test that's coming. I can think about a doctor's visit that's going to happen. I can think about a meeting I need to have. We can go on and on, can't we, about the things we can be thinking about? And yet, what does it mean to be present?

The flowers here this morning are from Malcolm's memorial service this week. And thinking about being present, he made me think about that because so often I would go in to visit him and he would be reading something like *Newsweek* or *Time* and would want to talk about it. He remained present. He could have easily been thinking about all that had happened in his life. He had a lot to think about; he had a long life, a lot of past. And he might have been thinking about the future and been worrying about that. He talked about the last roundup. But he stayed present.

It's not an easy thing to do, to be present when things are happening in our lives. What does it mean to be present? What does it mean to be present in worship? I'm not going to answer that, but I'm going to go on and think about what it means to be present in a particular moment. We talked about how we learn from the past, and then we are in the present. It's interesting how the present is that place where all that past begins to work its way out. Things begin to happen.

Jeremiah said something besides he was present. He said that he was accounted for. We sometimes think about that phrase—present and accounted for. Well, what do you account for? Don't we even say something like that—of what account are they, what

good are they? It seems like our present accounts for who we are. There's an accounting nature to our present. It feels to me a little bit like that's what Jesus is doing when he's talking to the crowd. He says you can look at the weather and make decisions, about your present. What about the rest of your time?

We talked last time about our story of faith and how we learn from that. Does our present account for that? Does somehow what we do now happen because of that story? If we have encountered the love of Jesus Christ and know the grace that God has given us, does our life account for that in any way? How is it present in our present? Isn't that what Jesus is asking in a way when he asks the people, "Why don't you judge what's going on so that you can do what is right?" It's a hard thing to do sometimes, to do what is right in the present.

I know that sometimes it's easy to get lost, forget where you are, lose track of your present moment like I just did. But the other thing I think about the present is that I'm usually looking for a present that is pleasant. I don't think it's that unusual. I don't really look for my present to be anything else. I want to look for a way for it to be pleasant. It's a little different than saying good. I wish I could say I was looking for good in the present. I think it's so easy to just look for the pleasant.

Then I read these scriptures, and somebody like Timothy says exercise does you a little good, but godliness is really valuable for the present and for future time, the age to come. He goes on to say it takes toil and struggle. I don't usually go into my present looking for ways to toil and struggle. I look for ways *not* to toil and struggle. Paul in Romans suggests that we share in the sufferings of Christ. I don't generally look for the present that way. What I'm suggesting is that as we look to our present, as we think about what Christ is calling us to do, that doing what is right is sometimes a little like the exercise we do. It's not always fun, and sometimes it's painful, but there's something in doing it that brings life in sharing in the grace that God has given us. Sometimes it takes work.

We are invited to spend time in the present with one another. We have to figure out how to do what is right. If our identity is in Christ, Christ is asking us to judge for ourselves what is right and do it, to work it out. It's not always easy to know what is right and as I noted in the confession, there are all kinds of reasons for not doing what is right: it's not convenient, it's not easy, it's awkward, it may not help my economic standing. There are all kinds of ways in which doing what's right is a struggle. Walking with Christ isn't always easy.

I'm glad I don't have to stop right there because it would feel a little bit like following Jesus is all suffering and toil and struggle. That is there, but there's also a recognition that God knows our weakness and God is with us. Psalm 46 talks about God being with God's people. Romans talks about God being with us. Even as we hear Jesus talk about judging if what to do is right, sometimes it feels like there's so much wrong how do you do it all? It's interesting what Jesus says. He takes one specific example: when you have a dispute, try to settle it. Sometimes doing what's right is pretty mundane. It's

work. It's not Superman kind of stuff, although sometimes it can feel pretty hard to go to somebody and try to work out a dispute and try to make things right between us. I've been there. I know how hard it is. But that's the very essence of what Jesus is calling us to do. But we're not alone. The Spirit is there with us and prays with sighs too deep for words, groans too deep for words. There's a sense of how much God is with us, expressing our own needs and guiding us through.

Indeed, as we are called to gather around the table it is in part to recognize God's presence with us and that not only does God call us into God's presence and is there to help sustain and feed us, but God calls us to be present with each other, to have that fellowship and in that to know the support and grace of God.

Although it is a little like exercise, it's not all pain. Sometimes when you do the very things that seem hard in the present, there comes the next present when things seem pretty great. Timothy talks about godliness—having a character to your life that is in reverence to God, that's godliness. Doing that is good for the present as well as for the ages to come. As we live in the present and do what is right—live together, find that support, allow God to sustain us—there's a wonderful promise at the end of that Romans passage that “God will work for good with those who love him.” It's not that we are looking for toil and struggle and suffering. We are looking for the right, that with God it will be good for the present as well as for the coming age—life everlasting. But we'll get to that next week.

Gracious God, it's so easy to be stuck in the past or focused on the future, or sometimes doing both. Help us be present. Let our faith be accounted for in this present, in what we do. Let us have learned from Christ that we might be able to judge what is right and do it. Guide us and when we struggle, Lord, let us come to you. Let your Spirit pray with us and guide us. Let us recognize that we can't do it all on our own, but you are with us. You call us to gather around the table. You sustain us. You gather us together that we might encourage one another, to live in the present, and to walk humbly with you, to love justice, to love you, and to let it be reflected in our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.