

Delivered Sunday, Feb. 24, 2019 – Northminster Pres., Macon

## **Prayer for Illumination**

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Covenant Keeper, Kingdom Builder, Vision Caster, in your word you offer us a way to live as a community bound by generosity and grace. Help us hear these words today, and help us live them out always. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of us all. Amen.

## **Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

## **Isaiah 55:1-5**

55 Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.

<sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

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Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.

<sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

<sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
a leader and commander for the peoples.

<sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has glorified you.

### Sermon: Living the Covenant

For the four years I attended the University of Alabama while pursuing my undergraduate degree, I got to participate in an active and vibrant campus ministry supported by the local churches. There, each week, young people my age gathered together from all walks of campus life: independent and Greek; engineers and artists; marching band members and national championship winning golfers; women and men; those on the “finish as fast as I can” plan and those on the “however long it takes” plan; overachievers and slackers; party-all-nighters and study-all-nighters; single and engaged; the fastidiously religious and the “I’ll worry

about that when I'm old" religious. We got together to eat, to study, to debate, to learn, to worship, to care and be cared for, and to live as a community. It wasn't perfect, we weren't all best friends, we didn't all agree on everything. But it was a place where I think everyone felt like they could be themselves, and could trust they would be loved and accepted as they came.

I have described the undergraduate years as one long, continuous period of transition. Every semester you get a new set of classes, professors, books, assignments and expectations. Most students do not end up getting a degree in the program or area which they intended to study upon entering. Friend groups shift, romantic relationships begin and end, and begin again. You are learning how to be an adult, and what things from your family of origin will remain important to you, and what things will not. And the whole time you know your time there has a time limit.

I'm not one of those people who looks back and says, "the college years were the best years of my life." So far, for me, each phase of life has been better than the last. But I know that without my UKirk community in college, those four years would have been much harder, more lonely, and less joy-filled.

Two years ago, the church sold the building in which my UKirk group met, and the campus minister, who started while I was in college, planned a "decommissioning" service for the building at which he invited former members to come and speak. Brandon Miles, who had graduated before I matriculated, said at the service that "the community we built here at UKirk was the closest thing to the kingdom of God I have ever experienced."

I now have the privilege and joy of building that same kind of community with some of the young people at Mercer University.

We gather each week, and they come, without money, and receive food without price. They are fed by the generous gift of members of the congregations of the Northeast cluster of Flint River Presbytery: you, Northminster, and the folks at St. Andrews, First Pres. Thomaston, Forsyth, Washington Avenue, Wayside, and Westminster. Members from these congregations come and bring a meal, rich, wholesome, nourishing food. But our gatherings aren't just about the food, they are also about the community, and the shared desire to grow in faith.

These young people have come to the waters, because they are thirsty for understanding, and whether they have been baptized or not, they have become a part of Christ's church. The Mercer student participants in UKirk didn't all grow up Presbyterian, and none of them knew what "kirk" meant when they first came (it's Scots for church). They came from different nations and different areas of our nation, they came from different racial, economic, and familial backgrounds. But they kept coming. They kept inviting their friends. They grew as friends, embracing my assertion that UKirk would be a "judgment free zone" so that everyone felt welcome, and free to ask questions, to wonder, and to develop as individuals and as a community.

In the Presbyterian Church at a baptism the congregation makes a promise. We are asked, "Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture this person, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ, and to be

faithful members of his church?” We respond, “We do.” With these two simple words, we promise once again to continue to live as a covenant people.

The prophet Isaiah and the book of Acts offer us visions of what living as a covenant people looks like: sharing everything, eating, teaching and learning together and praising God as a community; receiving abundance unlooked for and unearned, being reminded that the covenant isn't something for one individual or one family, but for all the nations, all the peoples, all the families.

The kirk, the church, isn't one person reading the Bible and praying alone. The kirk isn't one person breaking bread in solitude. The kirk is many voices, reading the Word, debating it, studying it, learning it, and living it. The kirk is many hands breaking bread together, passing the goblets of water, wine and milk so that, whatever you need, to be refreshed, gladdened or filled, you will receive it, without worrying about where it came from or what it cost. The kirk is people keeping the covenant, because God made the covenant first, and keeps it for every nation and every age. The kirk is people praising God for God's good grace and constancy. The kirk is the body that stands between the individual and self-destructive despair, and it is the body that receives the joy of the individual and makes it the joy of the community.

Isaiah's vision isn't an eschatological prophesy, offering hope for the comfort and wholeness God will offer at the end of days, it is a vision of a reality we can, and already do, live out each day. This vision offers us an invitation to live as claimed people, baptized people, covenant people.

We live out this vision by keeping the promises we made at the baptisms of so many by ensuring that when our young people move out of the home of their families, they still have a church home. We live this vision out by laying the table with wholesome food, offered without money and without price. We live this vision out by joining together to do far more than we can ever do as individuals, or even individual congregations.

Your support, saints of Northminster, in the last three years helped feed more than 80 different college students at least one meal, and for some about one meal a week; helped send a young man home to see his dying father the last time; helped more than four dozen students regularly gather to deeply engage with the Word, learn some of the finer points of predestination, and discern for themselves how their faith will guide them through both times of complete joy and times of the dark night of the soul.

Your participation in the mission of our Presbytery means that you are partners in building the kingdom of God right here in middle Georgia. Together, we are bringing to reality, even if for just a few people and just a few brief moments in time, Isaiah's vision of a place where the thirsty come to the waters, those without money come and buy wine, milk and bread without price, and feel the promise of the covenant, steadfast and sure love, proclaimed for them again and again. Thank you, and thanks be to God. Amen.