

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 19, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION

Hail Guest, we ask not what thou art.
If friend, we greet thee hand and heart;
If stranger, such no longer be;
If foe, our love shall conquer thee. – Sign on an old Welsh door.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

Wondrous God, present with us – even when we do not know it,
valuing us – when we do not care for ourselves, and planting in us the seed of
your Word, open our eyes to recognize you here: May we sense your presence
next to us.... May we hear your voice.... May we know your touch.... May we
see you in one another, and in the beauty all around us.... Indeed, may your
reality emerge deep inside each life, transforming our thoughts and our
deeds, and directing our relationships – both with one another, and with all
your children. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Most Holy God, you remain unknown unless you reveal yourself to us. As
the living presence of Christ was revealed to those disciples on the road to
Emmaus, now reveal yourself to us through the reading – and hearing – of Holy
Scripture, to the end that Christ might be better known and better loved, both by
us, and – through our deeds of discipleship – by others. Amen.

FIRST READING: I Peter 1:17-25

*Our first reading comes from the First Letter of Peter. These verses are
part of a section pervaded by the theme of hope – hope looks forward to the
resurrection of believers – a gracious implication of Christ's resurrection.
For those who wish to examine this passage in greater detail, there is a Bible
study on the table in the rear of the Sanctuary*

If you invoke as Father the one who judges impartially –
 according to each person's work,
 live in fear during the time of your exile.
You know that you were ransomed –
 from the futile conduct inherited from your ancestors,
 not with perishable things like silver or gold,
 but with the precious blood of Christ,
 like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.
He was destined before the foundation of the world,
 but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.

Through him you have come to trust in God,
 who raised him from the dead and gave him glory,
 so that your trust and hope are in God.
Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth –
 so that you have genuine mutual affection,
 love one another deeply from the heart.
You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed,
 through the living and enduring word of God.

For “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass.
 The grass withers, and the flower falls,
 but the word of the Lord endures for ever.”
That word is the good news that was announced to you.

SECOND READING: Luke 24:13-35

*Our second reading comes from Luke’s Gospel. It is an account of the
experience of two of Jesus’ other followers on that first Easter evening....*

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus,
 about seven miles from Jerusalem,
 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.
While they were talking and discussing,
 Jesus himself came near and went with them,
 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.
And he said to them,
 “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”
 They stood still, looking sad.
Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him,
 “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things
 that have taken place there in these days?”
He asked them, “What things?”
 They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth,
 who was a prophet mighty in deed and word
 before God and all the people,
 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over
 to be condemned to death and crucified him.
 “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.
 Yes, and besides all this,
 it is now the third day since these things took place.
 “Moreover, some women of our group astounded us.
 They were at the tomb early this morning,
 and – when they did not find his body there –

they came back and told us that they had indeed
seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.
"Some of those who were with us went to the tomb
and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him."
Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are,
and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!
"Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things,
and then enter into his glory?"
Then – beginning with Moses and all the prophets –
he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.
As they came near the village to which they were going,
he walked ahead as if he were going on.
But they urged him strongly, saying,
"Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over."
So he went in to stay with them.
When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it,
and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him,
and he vanished from their sight.
They said to each other,
"Were not our hearts burning within us
while he was talking to us on the road,
while he was opening the scriptures to us?"
That same hour, they got up and returned to Jerusalem,
and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.
They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"
Then they told what had happened on the road,
and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

SERMON

"Fostering *Philoxenia*"

Perhaps you remember **Pastor Rick Warren**.

You may even have read his best-selling book – *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

In any event, his church – the **Saddleback Church** in **California** –
is famous for *its hospitality*:

The church welcomes strangers as *guests* –
instead of as *visitors*.

And – about this – **Rick Warren** writes:

"The term 'visitor' implies that they're not here to stay.

*“The term ‘guest’ implies that this is someone
for whom you do everything you can
to make them feel comfortable.”*

For a *guest* – then – we will do *everything* we can;
for a *visitor*, not so much.

At **Saddleback**,
staffer **Erik Rees** leads a **“Guest Services Team,”**
that’s in charge of *first impressions*.

They are determined to be *good hosts*
to the strangers who come to them

Traffic attendants are trained to welcome people,
and point them toward the site of worship.

Greeters are positioned along walkways,
to welcome people and answer questions.

And, **ushers** are present in the Sanctuary
to respond to people and seat them.

The **goal** is that each guest will receive a total of *three greetings*
before sitting down in worship.

And, *these first impressions are critical:*

Rick Warren believes that guests
*“are deciding whether or not to come back
long before the pastor speaks.”*

Stranger. Guest. Host.

All three of these roles are *taken seriously* at **Saddleback Church**.

And – as **Luke** tells us in *this morning's reading* from his gospel –
all three roles are played by **Jesus** himself –
on that **first Easter afternoon** –
on the **road to Emmaus**:

That is, **Jesus** appears to two of his disciples,
first as a *stranger*,
then as a *guest*,
and – finally – as a *host*.

This passage – then – offers *us* valuable insights
into how *we* might do a better job
of *welcoming* – and *including* –
people in the life of the church.

So, on to the story:

First, we encounter Jesus as the Stranger:

As two disciples are traveling to the **village of Emmaus** –
on **Easter afternoon** –
the risen **Jesus** comes near and begins to walk with them.

But, their eyes are kept from recognizing him.

Jesus then *asks about the events* they're discussing.

And – one of them says –

***“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem
who does not know the things
that have taken place there in these days?”***

(v. 18)

Jesus – then – is *initially depicted* as a **stranger**,
giving his disciples the challenge of showing hospitality.

And, they *rise to the occasion*:

They practice *philoxenia* –
which literally means **“love of the stranger.”**

Philoxenia is one of the **Greek** words
used in the **New Testament** for *hospitality*.

But – unfortunately – this approach stands in stark contrast
to the attitude so prevalent in society today –
xenophobia, “fear of the stranger.”

What might it mean for us to practice *philoxenia* in congregational life?

We can do it when we walk alongside youth – or adults –
to help equip them for life.

We can do it as we serve at **Emmanuel Dining Room**,
or deliver **Meals-on-Wheels**.

We can do it by making an intentional effort
to **speak to guests** after worship,
instead of looking around for those we know –
to conduct church business..

Indeed, we can do it almost anytime,
in almost any place!

But – in every case – this is *philoxenia*, the love of the stranger.

And – *whenever* we practice it –
we are likely to discover that strangers really aren’t so strange.

Second, we find Jesus as a Guest:

As they come near **Emmaus** –
the village that is the *disciples’ destination* –
Jesus walks on ahead, *as if* he is going on.

But the disciples urge him strongly, saying,
**“Stay with us, because it is almost evening
and the day is now nearly over.”**

(v. 29)

They *welcome* him;
they *include* him in their lives,
and they *invite* him to stay with them.

And – so – **Jesus** *becomes their guest.*

In a similar way,
Jesus wants *us* to take good care of the guests who come to us.

Indeed, **Jesus** *challenges* us –
to feed the hungry and welcome outcasts –
even as he did,
throughout his ministry.

There is a scene in the gospel of **Matthew**
that *stresses the importance* of this kind of care.

In the final judgment of the nations – in **Matthew 25** –
Jesus announces that he *frequently appears* to us as a guest.

Specifically, he comes in the form of people
who are in need of food, drink, a warm welcome,
or perhaps – even – just a smile of recognition..

And so – he says to his followers –

*“Come, you that are blessed by my Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you
from the foundation of the world;*

*for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”*

(vv. 34-35)

The followers of **Jesus** – then – hear these words,
but they're *confused*.

They *don't remember* seeing **Jesus** and helping him.

So – they ask – *“Lord, when was it
that we saw you hungry ... thirsty ... a stranger?”*

And **Jesus** answers them simply,

*“Truly I tell you, just as you did it
to one of the least of these who are members of my family,
you did it to me.”* (vv. 37-40)

Friends, **Jesus** also comes to us as a guest – even today.

When *we* help a person in need, we’re really helping **Jesus**.

And this happens not only in church,
but on the street,
in the neighborhood,
in school,
and in the workplace.

An ancient poem – called *“The Gaelic Rune of Hospitality”* –
says it well:

I saw a stranger yestereen,
I put food in the eating place
drink in the drinking place
music in the listening place
and in the sacred names
of the Holy Trinity
He blessed my house,
my cattle, and my dear ones,
and the lark sang her song:

Often, often, often
goes the Christ in a stranger’s guise,
Often, often, often
goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.

Finally, we find Christ as the host.

Notice *what happens next* on the road to **Emmaus**.

Jesus -- formerly a stranger -- *becomes the guest* of the disciples
when he accepts their invitation to stay.

But -- then -- he quickly *changes roles*.

When he's *sitting at the table* with them,
he becomes their host:
He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them.

Then -- **Luke** tells us -- their eyes are opened,
and they recognize him --
and he vanishes from their sight. (vv. 30-31)

And -- like **Abraham** and **Sarah**,
who *practiced hospitality* by the **oaks of Mamre** -- (Genesis 18:1-15)
the disciples discover that --
when they welcome a stranger --
they welcome the **Lord**.

The role of **Jesus** -- then --
changes from *stranger* to *guest* to *host*
when he sits at the table and breaks the bread. (v. 30)

And, this transition *continues to happen* today --
as the risen **Christ** nourishes us,
when we celebrate the **Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**.

As the bread is broken,
we're invited to *open our hearts* to the presence of **Christ**.

Through the power of the **Holy Spirit**,
he comes *to feed us*,
and *to fill us* with his power, and his presence.

But – the fact is –
sometimes it's *easier for us* to help others
than to *receive help*.

That is, we would rather *be a host* than to humble ourselves
and *let someone else* be the host.

But – especially at the **Lord's Supper** –
it is essential that we permit **Jesus** to be our host;
to eat his bread, and drink his cup.

Then – like the disciples on the road to **Emmaus** –
our eyes will be opened,
and *we* will recognize the **Lord**.

Our passage ends with the two disciples *racing back* to **Jerusalem** –
to *share the news* of their experience with the other disciples.

They tell them what happened on the road,
and how the **Risen Christ**

*“had been made known to them
in the breaking of the bread.”*

(v. 35)

Their message – then – is a *proclamation*,
and it's something that *we are all* challenged to do.

And – happily – to do so *is not* complicated.

To make a proclamation is *simply to talk about*
how we have *personally experienced*
the love and activity of **God**.

And, our proclamation *is not* debatable –
it is *nothing more* than *our own, personal*, experience.

To be sure, this proclamation is going to be different for each one of us –
and such differences are just fine.

They are an *inherent part* of the diversity of life in a church –
a church that is made up of a variety of *unique individuals*.

During his papacy,
Pope Francis stirred up the **Roman Catholic Church**,
gaining particular attention for working
to make the church “*the home of all.*”

And – during an interview –
he talked about both **proclamation** and **Christian hospitality**.

He said,
“*Proclamation ... focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things.
This is also what fascinates and attracts more,
what makes the heart burn,
as it did for the disciples at Emmaus.*”

It is interesting that the pope mentioned **Emmaus**,
because this is where **Jesus** came to his disciples
as a *stranger*, as a *guest*, and as a *host*.

Emmaus is where we learn *how to welcome* one another around a table,
and – then – to *go out into the world* with a proclamation.

Emmaus is where we *come together*,
and *strengthen our bonds* – with **Jesus** – and with each other.

Indeed, when we practice **Christian hospitality**,
we become part of a *mighty spiritual movement* –
a movement that can *overcome divisions*
in a *terribly polarized world*.

And it all begins when we foster *philoxenia* – the love of the stranger.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

Adapted from the Confession of 1967

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate us from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.

Life in Christ is eternal. The resurrection of Jesus is God's sign that he will consummate his work of creation and reconciliation beyond death and bring to fulfillment the new life begun in Christ. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (*Unison*)

We thank you, gracious God, for the privilege of joining with Christ in the proclamation of your love. May the ministries we support serve to unite people despite all differences, building up the body of Christ, and reaching out to the world with healing energy. Bless these gifts and all who – in any way – invest themselves to make your love known. Amen.

CHARGE AND BLESSING

Remember the words of the old hymn – *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*:

“Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, Interposed his precious blood.”

Following in Jesus' footsteps, we, too, are to seek the stranger.

But – then – all we need interpose is a personal proclamation;
that is, to tell them the good news of what Christ has done for us!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....