

“Who What When Where How Why”
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 9, 2023
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

As many of you know, I am taking an extended vacation this summer, beginning this week as I prepare for my wedding. During this time off, I will be getting married, taking a brief honeymoon, visiting family around the country, and spending time resting and relaxing. I thank the Personnel committee for making this possible, as well as the church staff: Darren, Judy, Ben, Christian, Dick, Vanessa and others who will continue to lead while I am away. We have a series of guest preachers lined up, and we have on-call pastoral care available. If you or someone you know is in need of pastoral care, please contact the Church Office and they will direct you to the pastor on call.

While I am away from SFBC, worship will center on the Affirmation of Values statement that was written about a decade ago. It is comprised of six values, which I now invite you to read responsively with me. The text is printed in your bulletin.

*Please read responsively the **bolded** words.*

One: Faithful to our Baptist heritage, we strive for a world where people are welcomed regardless of, and with respect for, their religious beliefs; where the separation of church and state is vigorously defended; where freedom is a fundamental right that values the dignity of all persons without regard to their race, country of birth, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, or disabilities; and where compassion is the measure of our actions.

ALL: We will go deeper in faith as we do justice, love mercy, work for peace and walk humbly with God.

One: We will be present to one another and our neighbors in our personal relationships and by creating venues for engagement where we can learn about viewpoints different from our own.

ALL: We will respect all religions by learning about the beliefs, values and struggles of our neighbors and by demonstrating support for them.

One: We will welcome the stranger, including immigrants and refugees, as our Scriptures instruct. We will explore how to support their causes and advocate for justice, remembering that many of us are the children of immigrants and refugees.

ALL: We will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic prejudices.

One: We will protect our environment and support preservation programs that are based on scientific data designed to improve our resources, enhance biodiversity, and reverse human-caused climate change.

ALL: We affirm these commitments as we continue to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

In my view, these values serve multiple purposes. They tell us Who we are, What we do together given When and Where we are, Why we gather, and How we are to be.

In a way, they describe who we are and what we care about: spirituality, justice, hospitality, welcome, inclusion, environmental wellbeing and more. And in a way, they are also aspirational, as each value starts by saying “we will.” And they are aspirational because we are aware, sometimes acutely, that we have a lot of work to do to live into these values—because it is hard, and daunting, and often painful work to excavate the systemic prejudices that are deeply embedded in ourselves, our institution, and our society. And it is a huge challenge to walk humbly with God. And being present with each other is so very complex, because we are each people with our own individual ways of being in the world, that often can chafe when we disagree with others or find differences among us. There is much work to do, church, and these values remind us of that.

I also believe these values are a living document—in part because of the qualities I have just named, of how they are both descriptive of what already exists and also aspirational. But a living document can, and should, shift and change depending on what issues are pulling on our hearts and calling us to address them. For example, I wonder if opposing Christian nationalism or pursuing peace in the face of rising gun violence or addressing mental health care would fit in with these values now. Or if we could explicitly say that we welcome the participation, membership and ministry of LGBTQIA+ people? That we fight transphobia, as it rises all over the country? I wonder what you would add.

And as a living document, are there things that we might want to change in these values? A turn of phrase that has been useful to us, but now we need something different? An idea that we think about differently than we used to? I wonder what the possibilities may be.

In addition to centering our worship around each of the six values for the remainder of the summer, we will be singing our way through the Heritage Hymns that were set aside about ten years ago. And as Ben and Christian and Vanessa and I were thinking about our Heritage Hymns, we found ourselves wondering how they fit into the values, what songs may be missing from their number, and what we might change about our existing hymns. So each of the six Sundays concerning the Affirmation of Values, as well as today, we will sing at least one Heritage Hymn. But it also needs to be said that we have learned that the composer of the Lakeshore hymn, Fr. Cesáreo Gabaráin, was an abuser...and so we have made the decision not to sing that song. And so questions of justice enter the discussion of our Heritage Hymns—what do we do when a leader, a composer, a preacher, a voice we have looked to for wisdom lets us down at the least,

and causes deep harm? How does this change how we think about the elements of our worship experience, and the real lives of people in this community who have been and are affected by similar situations of harm?

It is precisely our real lives that the Values are concerned with, because these Values also serve to provide us with information about how to be in community. On our church website, you can also find the Behavioral Norms and our Mission and Vision, which inform how we are to be together. But the Values serve an important role in this too—they remind us that we are to do these things: to work to mitigate human-caused climate change, to undo biases of sexism and racism and ageism, to learn about views different from our own, to do justice, to oppose and undo systemic prejudices, to measure our actions by compassion alone.

The Values can hold us accountable to our community and who we want to be in this world—when we speak or behave in a way that does not live up to these values that form part of our covenant of how we will be in community, we need to hold each other accountable. That doesn't mean cruelly pointing out that someone is a bad person; it means speaking in love and saying, "I know *you*, I know *we*, can do and be better." Asking for accountability is part of any relationship—when we do harm, it is important to acknowledge it and apologize. Too many people in this world don't know how to say, "I'm sorry for the harm I've done." In this church, if we are going to live into our Values, we need to know how to own our part in hurt caused, how to stay in relationship through conflict, how to recognize accountability and that it is different from ostracizing, and how to learn and move forward in community.

For a moment, as we were planning this worship series, I paused and thought, "Oh no! I won't--the pastor won't--be there during this series!" But then...I thought, "that's ok."

It's ok because *you*, dear ones, are the church. This building, though beautiful, is not the church. The pastor is not the church. The staff are not the church. *You* are the church.

Of course, we all contribute to making this congregation a church family, and a community of belonging...but *the people* are the church.

And so these are *your* values. These are *your* Heritage Hymns. The worship done here in this place is speaking on *your* behalf to the Holy and to our community.

I wonder what you will discover as you explore the Affirmation of Values again this summer. What will occur in your heart as your ears ring with the Heritage Hymns. What conversations will happen over coffee hour and at the dinner table and during Council meetings. How these Values will occupy your mind and heart and vision for our community as you explore each of them.

Whatever your thoughts and feelings and questions and answers and ideas and wonderings may be, I ask you this: keep your mind open, keep your heart vulnerable, keep your self present with these dear people who have committed to journey alongside you as we all seek to follow the Way of Jesus. You never know what the Holy may do with you, with us, with our church, next.

Beloved church, I love you, and I love being your pastor. Amen.