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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
July 5, 2015

Psalm Selection on God's Creation
Genesis 1:26-27; Galatians 3:26-28
"A New World"

Being away from the pulpit for two Sundays, effectively three weeks, seems like a lifetime. The world can change in the time and in fact, it has in the past three weeks.

The Pope released an earth-shaking encyclical on the environment, the Confederate flag came under fire after its association with the killing of nine AME church members in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Supreme Court made same sex marriages legal in the every State of the Union.

It is shocking that a person would sit in a Bible study and then allegedly open fire on the class members with the intention to kill. I imagine that African-American churches and perhaps mosques around the country have to consider seriously having bodyguards in their places of study and worship. It is a sad indictment.

Our prayers continue to go out to the members, family and friends of the Charleston worshipping community as well as to all beleaguered communities across the country. We must eradicate racism, discrimination and violence.

My sermon is a kind of catch-up of these major events. I address them briefly since they touch us and have important implications for our lives as Christians. In my 30 years of ministry, all these areas have challenged me personally and been the wrestling ground for the church locally and nationally.

One of my most beautiful and vivid memories is an ecumenical sunrise service on the beach near Jacksonville, Florida, to commemorate Earth Day in the late eighties when Earth Day was in its infancy. The director of Earth Day Jacksonville was a member of the church I served at the time. She asked me to preach at the sunrise service. During my sermon, the rising sun cast pink and yellow hues over a calm sea while seagulls and pelicans flew serenely overhead. The congregation faced the rising sun.

Most of you have seen my last pastoral letter in the Log highlighting the Pope's encyclical. The beauty of the document is its biblical underpinnings and its challenge to industry and concern for the poor who are most adversely affected by climate change. We all will be harmed if we do not do all we can to live more sustainably. Humanity's so-called "dominion" of the earth becomes

“stewardship” of the earth in concert with the rest of scripture as read by Debbie. Dominion really is God’s dominion, which is care for the earth and its people.

What I didn’t mention in the Log article is our denomination’s lead in the area. Go online and in the search area type, “Presbyterian and environment” and you’ll get the churches position. You will see that Presbyterian General Assemblies have been speaking on issues of environmental protection and justice since the late 1960s. Their witness ranges broadly from drinking water safety and acid rain, to protecting endangered species, to cleaning up dirty power plants, to climate change and U.S. energy policy. The Assemblies’ major policy statements on the environment were in 1971 and 1990 and on energy in 1981, all found online.

Roman Catholics and Protestants have come a long way in joining hands and hearts since the Reformation. It takes the sinking of our world to do so. “There are no atheists in foxholes.”

The Confederate Flag controversy: The headline of an op ed article in the Chronicle last Monday, written by New York University history professor, Jonathan Zimmerman, caught my attention. It read, “Bring down symbol, not memory of fallen.”

Needless to say, racism, ethnicism, classism and other isms are roundly frowned upon by the church at large. They violate the biblical injunction that all people are created in God’s image and therefore have dignity and worth.

I remember visiting South Africa in the years after the historic free and fair election for all its citizens and in a food market parking lot, I saw a White person drive up in a light truck with a gun rack hanging over a broadly displayed Confederate Flag in his back window.

Surprised to see this in South Africa, I asked the driver what the flag meant. Of course, I knew what it meant. I wanted his version. He said with vehemence, “Kill the kaffirs!” Kaffir in South Africa is the “n-word” in the USA. The driver rode off and I thought, “He’s a dead man.” Apparently, the Charleston alleged killer, Dylann Roof, displayed on his website the Confederate Flag and the flags of apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Professor Zimmerman states that because of the nationalism and racial hatred the Confederate flag engenders, it must come down but not monuments to Confederate Army victims in the Civil War.

Referring to the patriotic sacrifice of Southern soldiers, he writes, “To be sure, these men were on the wrong side of history. But they are a part of our history, no matter our politics, race or region. The Confederate flag needs to come

down, and it will. But everything else should stand, now and forever, so we can remember who we were. That's the only way for us to figure out — as a single nation — what we want to become.”

Jacksonville was a southern State city and had all the sensibilities of a southern perspective on the Civil War. A member of the church was an officer in the United Daughters of the Confederacy and she asked me to perform a memorial service for the Confederate war dead.

I was fresh out of seminary and newly arrived from South Africa and read a book on the Civil War the night before and disagreed with everything the south stood for and yet I felt it important to officiate at the service because these southern folk were still grieving the loss of loved ones.

In an old Civil War graveyard, I walked the fine line of respecting and recognizing their grief while at the same time mentioning that I hoped we would not have a repeat of such events. God wanted peace with justice. Everyone was happy and after the service, we had the best southern fish fry in a backyard with fresh fish dipped into a can of boiling oil, then rolled in batter and served with coleslaw and grits.

Finally, the Supreme Court decision allowing same sex marriages in every State: According to a Chronicle article (June 29, 2015), “For more than a century, justices have argued over whether the Constitution is a ‘living’ document, with rights that can be redefined and expanded over time, or whether its language must be interpreted strictly as its drafters would have understood it. Justice Scalia, a leading exponent of the latter view, has proclaimed the virtues of a ‘dead Constitution.’

Speaking for court majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy, said, “Rights come not from ancient sources alone. They rise, too, from a better informed understanding of how constitutional imperatives define a liberty that remains urgent in our own era.”

In past marriage rulings, which presumed that spouses were of opposite sexes, “the court, like many institutions, has made assumptions defined by the world and time of which it is a part,” Kennedy said. “Those assumptions,” he said, “came from a period in which much of the health profession considered homosexuality an illness, rather than ‘a normal expression of human sexuality,’ as psychiatrists now recognize.

That awareness, he said, leads inevitably to the conclusion that “there is dignity in the bond between two men or two women who seek to marry and in their autonomy to make such profound choices,” protected by the constitutional rights to both liberty and equality.

One of the issues for the church is whether society defines the church or the church defines society. Presbyterians in our denomination and other mainline churches can say in this case that they have been in the forefront of defining the issue. Only this last month, our constitution permitted pastors to perform same gender marriages in States that allowed it. Now all States permit it. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has advocated for almost four decades for civil rights for LGBT persons. The decision by the U.S. Supreme Court is in keeping with that work.

Another challenge of factions in the church that disagree with same sex marriage is whether it is biblically sound. According to the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, "The Bible does not contemplate the possibility of same-gender marriage; but many who stand under the authority of Scripture today, in the spirit of the ever-widening understanding of who is included in the love and grace of God, have concluded that biblical moral logic values committed, mutual, loving partnerships – regardless of the gender of the partners."

My friends, Linda, a United Church of Christ pastor, and Susan, a teacher, who live in Jacksonville, Florida, can now enjoy living with full rights in their State which they had to leave a couple of years ago to get married in San Francisco. They've been living together for over 20 years.

While we have moved into a new world in these past few weeks there is still much of the old in it not to make us complacent. Nevertheless, let us celebrate this July 4th the strides for good that the church and society have made in just these these three weeks. Amen.