

## **Florence Sthresley Memorial**

**April 18, 2021**

### **Gathering Music**

#### **Welcome**

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We gather today in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, to give thanks to God for the life of Florence Sthresley, to receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and to proclaim the good news of life eternal.

#### **Call to Worship/Sentences of Scripture**

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ,

In her baptism Flo was clothed with Christ;

In the day of Christ's coming, she shall be clothed with glory.

"I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord. "Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

#### **Opening Prayer**

Eternal God, maker of heaven and earth: You formed us from the dust of the earth, and by your breath you gave us life. We glorify you.

Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life: You tasted death for all humanity, and by rising from the grave you opened the way to eternal life. We praise you.

Holy Spirit, author and giver of life: You are the comforter of all who sorrow, our sure confidence and everlasting hope. We worship you.

To you, O blessed Trinity, be glory and honor, forever and ever. Amen.

**Old Testament Readings** – Kerra, Ruth Brown

***Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24***

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue,

O LORD, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

<sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

<sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

<sup>11</sup>If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

<sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

<sup>13</sup>For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

<sup>16</sup>Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

<sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

<sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with you.

<sup>23</sup>Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

<sup>24</sup>See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

***Psalm 23 in Tshiluba*** – Ruth Brown

***Psalm 23 from Psalms Now***

The Lord is my constant companion. There is no need that He cannot fulfill. Whether His course for me points to the mountain tops of glorious joy or to the valleys of human suffering, He is by my side. He is ever present with me. He is close to me when I tread the dark streets of danger, and even when I flirt with death itself. He will not leave me when the pain is severe, He is near to comfort. When the burden is heavy, He is there to lean upon. When depression darkens my soul. He touches me with eternal joy. When I feel empty and alone, He fills the aching vacuum with His power. My security is in His promise to be near me always, and in the knowledge that He will never let me go.

**Reflection:** Christian Mission begins with Genuine Friendship

Rev. Kerra English

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Almighty God, in Jesus Christ you promised many rooms within your house. Give us faith to see, beyond touch and sight, some sure sign of your kingdom, and, where vision fails, to trust your love which never fail. Lift heavy sorrow and give us good hope in Jesus, so we may bravely walk our earthly way, and look forward to glad reunion in the life to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Ashland Presbyterian Church Choir**

**New Testament Scriptures:** Lisa, Charles, Inge

***John 14: 1-6a, 25-27***

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

<sup>25</sup>“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

### ***Romans 8: 26-39***

<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup>We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### ***I Corinthians 15: 54-58***

<sup>54</sup>When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

<sup>55</sup>“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

<sup>56</sup>The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup>But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>58</sup>Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

**Reflection:** The Love that Will Not Let Us Go

Rev. Kerra English

**Prayer of Commendation**

Holy God, by your creative power, you gave us life, and in your redeeming love you have given us new life in Christ. We commend Florence to your merciful care in the faith of Christ our Lord who died and rose again to save us, and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**Ashland Presbyterian Church Choir** – “God Be with You Till We Meet Again”

**Benediction** –

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

**Remembrances** -Anyone who wants to tell stories will be invited to do so

**Closing Music/Reception**

## **Reflection: Christian Mission Begins with Genuine Friendship**

Flo lived her life through a clear and very particular calling – to mission work. As she tells the story in her own words, “On a certain day, long ago, when I was a teenager attending a youth conference, God called me to my life’s work.” She was sitting on the hillside at Massanetta Springs, listening to Chal Vincent talk about his father’s missionary work in China – and “God,” as she says, “used that speech to call me to me to be a missionary.” I have heard her tell that story, and it’s also the opening paragraph of her memoir, “See What God Can Do.” The book is titled appropriately because Flo would not be known apart from always pointing toward God at work in her life. Everything in her experience passed through the test of scripture. God’s Word coursed through Flo’s veins. I suspect that she probably “narrowed down” her choices of scripture for her own Memorial service to just two Old Testament readings, three New Testament readings, the “usual affirmations about the resurrection” – her words - and a scriptural benediction. So today we are doing it all.

Her knowing the Bible so well makes it interesting to see what she chose to have read. She chose two beloved psalms – and three deep affirmations from the New Testament of God’s love, known to her in Jesus Christ. I’ll reflect on those words of and about Jesus in a bit, but her two psalm choices are both about God’s protection and support when times get tough. She was no stranger to difficulty. She had surgery on her feet as a child. She suffered with tropical diseases at a time when she was trying to prove her Tshiluba language skills. She chose to live most of her years half-ways around the world from her Ashland upbringing where her presence was sometimes welcome and other times not. And tragically, she lost a young adult daughter to death - and wrestled with whether or not it could have been preventable. She was a force – certainly through her 80’s and pretty far into her 90’s. Though she wielded her power gently, when she spoke up, people listened. She spoke with the voice of someone who has lived through hardship and into the kind of joy that isn’t typical of someone who has felt the presence of death up close.

The wording of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that she picked articulates exactly the kind of trust she had in God – who absolutely was her constant companion. And she evangelized the heck out of that message. God knew what God was doing in drawing her into the mission field. Though I did not know her in her Congo days, here’s what Katerina K. Whitley, author of *“Speaking for Ourselves: Voices of Biblical Women”* says about Flo, “Without fanfare, without pride, but with enormous courage and above all, trust, Flo and Charlie Strheshley brought good news to the people of the Congo. They were the best of what we think of as missionaries: instead of imposing their own culture, they offered the Congolese the gift of education; instead of looking down on them, they loved them; instead of living lives of privilege, they shared in their lot, brining up three children amidst the people they served.”

In other words, Pastor and author Brian McClaren’s words specifically, “Christian mission begins with genuine friendship.” It has to. Whether you are talking to a neighbor or immersing yourself in another culture, fake motives don’t ever truly work. For Flo, telling people about God’s love in Christ was always about genuine caring, genuine concern, and her genuine faith. She literally wrote the book on the Tshiluba language. You can’t learn the nuances of a language like that without love. I don’t think it’s possible. In particular, you could tell how much she LOVED the women and children of the Congo. They were her people. She was curious about knowing them, invested in their future, and determined that they would know their belovedness in God. Then later in life she invested the same way in the members of Ashland Presbyterian Church and our interns, particularly in our Korean-born intern who was called to the clergy having known the value of Presbyterian missionaries’ work in Korea. She knew the names and faces of the typically nameless and faceless immigrant staff members at Westminster Canterbury. She started conversations with people unafraid to let them know that the joy and happiness in her heart was about Jesus being there. Claiming the word “evangelist” in the best possible way is to see the light in Flo’s eyes when she really connected

with another person. She had the gift – the gift Jesus talks about as being the greatest gift of all – that she gave her life – all of it – poured out for her friends – in the Congo and throughout her life.

## **Reflection: The Love That Will Not Let Us Go**

In these New Testament texts, I think that Flo was leaving us, those who would be attending her memorial service, a legacy, the legacy that she intended to instill in every single person that she met. The love that God shows us in Christ – brings us peace, guarantees us a place of belonging, cannot be separated from us by earthly difficulties, and has an imperishability – even beyond death. She was leaving us a message about the love that will not let us go. God's love had a hold on her life, and she felt all the richer for it. But she didn't keep it to herself, she strove to give it away to anyone and everyone who might listen. I'm not quite the person that she was – not the same era – not the same intensity - so I suspect at times – it could be a bit much. When someone has that singleness of mind – we both admire it, and if it's not in us, we can find ourselves judged a bit by it.

She reminded me, as the pastor of Ashland Presbyterian church, of HER church, that I had big shoes to fill of pastors that she admired and of her own father who spent his Sunday afternoons, ALL afternoon, visiting members of the church – especially those who failed to show up on Sunday morning. She had a drive in her. But I also found that her drive was in fact, fueled by love.

Of course, it is true that Jesus himself could be a bit much. His disciples had their doubts at times, and sometimes didn't get everything that he was telling them. But the message of Jesus, the message of Flo Sthresley, remain the same – God's love is the biggest truth that we have. It is a lot to carry. It is a lot to pass on. Spanning the centuries of Christianity, it has been women like Flo who have that fire in their hearts, who have been the ones to see past the rules and regulations of the institutional church, and dive straight away into the relationships that make the gospel come alive with each passing generation, and in every corner of the globe. The first evangelists who spoke "Christ is Risen" were the women and Flo stands steadfastly in that same tradition of boldly sharing

the good news. May it be said by everyone here today, and be the voice of God ringing in our ears that we hear Flo's call to peace and rest with: "Well done, my good and faithful servant."