

# 23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF PENTECOST | SERMON

Isaiah 65:17-25 | 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 | Luke 21:5-19 | The Rev. Catherine Healy | St. Paul & the Redeemer

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I have always been drawn to the church, but one thing that's changed for me throughout my life is where I like to sit once I get there. As a teenager, I lived in fear of getting stuck on the end of an aisle and getting up at the wrong time to go to communion. As a young adult, I liked to sit right up front, where I had the best view. And now, as a parent, when I get to sit in church with my toddler, it's near an exit sign—just in case she gives me a reason to make a hasty retreat.

A lot of us have favored seats, no matter what church we attend: We're "front row" people or "back row" people or "middle of the seventh pew on the right" people. But coming to SPR requires a paradigm shift, because there are no pews, and no obvious back row.

The best or worst part of worshiping in the round, depending on your perspective, is that there's really no way to sit in the back. Our worship space is a reminder that all of us are an equal distance from the center. Longtimer or newcomer, we all have the same claim on this place, and we all stand equal before God.

Today we celebrate the beginning of our fall stewardship campaign, with the theme of "Imagining Our Future." And it's true that a stewardship campaign involves asking for money. But as a church, when we raise money, we raise it as an offering to God, with the prayer that God may

guide us to more fully become a community that mirrors the radical hospitality practiced by Jesus.

This is why we fund our ministries and pay our extraordinarily talented staff. This is why we support our outreach partners and put so much effort into formation. This is why we tune our organ and, dare I say it, repair our boiler. (If you're visiting, you should know that it's not usually this cold.)

All of our resources are offered up in service to our mission. And what is most exciting to me is exploring what it looks like for each of us to have a claim to that mission—to claim the right to imagine the future for this church, and to discern what God is imagining for us.

The Bible always reminds me that God's imagination is a million zillion times more powerful than my own. Today, Isaiah teaches us that God is imagining something amazing. New heavens and a new earth! A new world with a new way of being, where creatures will not have to hurt each other in order to survive.

I don't know about you, but I have tried to order my life in a way that doesn't hurt anybody, and it is an exercise in frustration, because it is just a long itemized list of things I can't do. I can't invest in companies that are socially irresponsible, which turns out to be every company. I can't eat foods that were unsustainably grown. I can't wear clothes that were made in sweatshops.

Eventually, I find myself broke, hungry, and naked, and I give up.

But God's dream for the world is different. Isaiah's vision is not one of restrictions—there's no mention that the wolf will not be allowed to eat the lamb, even though it probably really wants to—but one of covenant. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, side by side. One will not have to harm the other. It won't even want to.

Frankly, I can't imagine that world. But God can.

And so I rely on God's imagination when mine fails, and trust that God is using our small offering to help us lay a path toward that holy mountain: that God can use our food pantry to help end hunger in this city, and our FOLLOW ME TO GODLY PLAY sign as one beacon of a coming world where every child is safe and loved.

This is no small thing, to live into the future that God is imagining for us. Jesus warns us that it will come at a cost. I would argue that this makes following him a more, rather than less, worthwhile goal. Yes, faith means sacrifice—but sacrifices are always necessary if you want to be part of something lasting and great.

Even as we take care of this beautiful building, which feels so permanent and solid, we have to remember that the building itself is not eternal. Instead, we invest in this space because it centers our lives on Christ, who *is* eternal.

We're not here for our building. We're not here for ourselves. We're here for Jesus.

And we are also here for each other. All of Paul's warnings about idleness are ultimately to say: *This*

*is important work that we're doing. And it can only get done if everyone contributes.*

Also: This is exciting work. Why would you not want to contribute? Why sit around being idle when you have the chance to be part of something so much greater than yourself?

I will say it again: Each one of us has a claim to the mission of this place. When you commit your energy, your money, your time, you are staking that claim and strengthening SPR's ability to do the work of Christ in the world.

As we look ahead to 2020, the future is already bright. Our church is thriving. We've been lucky to welcome so many new people this year, and to celebrate the leadership of people who are already here. The goal for this year's stewardship campaign is to have participation from 200 households. This is an ambitious goal—over the last four years, we've had pledge numbers anywhere between 150 and 190. But a lot of people come to this church, and we are all the same distance from the center.

This is the only time during this campaign that you'll hear me make a direct ask from the pulpit: Please make a financial pledge to St. Paul & the Redeemer for 2020. Your pledge matters, whether the dollar amount is big or small. It is an act of commitment to something greater than yourself. Now is the time for you to claim the right to imagine our future.