

**May 20, 2018  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB**

### **“In The Spirit”**

**Good morning! It’s been a busy past week here at Creekside and away from Creekside -- I’m speaking for myself, but I’m sure it’s true for a lot of you, too; I’ve seen many of you here, preparing and serving a funeral dinner, setting up and decorating tables, working out on the grounds, and putting together this worship installation and practicing music for the service today. I know there are lots of other activities going on besides all this at Creekside for many of you.**

**I want to spend some time this morning talking about a special part of my week: an opportunity which I had that I know you’ll hear even more about in the weeks to come. Ron Nicodemus, Diane Lund and I went to Indianapolis on Wednesday evening for an all-day event on Thursday: the Orientation Day for our Community Ministry Grant. Representatives from each of the other 30 congregations around the state of Indiana were there, too. You’ll be receiving and discussing more of the information which was shared there, but I want to talk about a particular part of that event, an opening presentation by Dr. Kilen Gray of New Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Shelbyville, KY. I won’t preach his sermon -- I couldn’t match his style even if I tried -- but I will share some of his insights.**

**Fifteen years ago, give or take, when Dr. Gray’s church was having meeting in their basement after the worship service to talk about their identity and ministry, they got two key insights: one from an elderly member of the congregation, Ms. Lani Jones, and one from a high school student. Neither of these people were deacons or ushers or leaders or the movers and shakers of the congregation, but the group had agreed to respect everyone’s input.**

**Members of the church had been asking friends and neighbors in their community, “What do you think of when you hear the name of**

our church?" The association that most people had was that it was a family church -- this was true; New Mt. Zion was started more than 100 years before by three families, and many of the members were still related to each other. Although the church prided itself on being welcoming and friendly, folks in the community didn't think they'd fit in if they weren't part of those families. So as the group in the basement was trying to figure out how they could shake this association as a family church, this long-time member and saint of the church said, "Pastor, I believe that family is the greatest blessing we have. If you don't have family, you don't have anything." And through that comment, the congregation began to realize that what they had assumed was a weakness was actually their strength. Because of that prophetic word from Ms. Lani Jones, the congregation wrote a mission statement -- which they still use -- which begins, "Our mission is to win souls for Christ by being a family healing center." Family was already their identity; they made it the center of their mission.

The other comment which came out of those meetings was from a high school boy that nobody thought was paying attention. He had not spoken in any of the previous meetings, and no one expected him to have anything to say in this one. So it was a surprise when he put up his hand and asked, "Can I say something?" Of course. And he said, "Pastor, we're in the Bible." And the passage this young man was reading was Ezekiel 37: the reading which you heard this morning about Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones. I chose to use this text for this sermon about three weeks ago: as you might imagine, that sermon has undergone a pretty radical re-write in the past few days.

Today is Pentecost -- this was Jewish harvest holiday that came 50 days after Passover, or seven weeks after Easter. In Acts chapter 2, this is the day when the disheartened and dispirited disciples are gathered in Jerusalem and suddenly there's a rush of wind throughout the house and tongues of fire above their heads, and the Spirit gives them the ability to preach in other languages. I'll spare you the entire list of Parthians and Medes and Cappadocians and Elamites and all the rest -- a lot of different languages. It's an image of the Holy Spirit working through our speaking and our listening and our understanding. It's an image I know we'll be coming back to, and I hope our worship installation will serve as a reminder of the Spirit in

our midst, even when you're no longer wearing red, yellow, orange, or white.

Ezekiel gives us another image of the Spirit which is both similar and different than Acts 2. Of course, Ezekiel came about 600 years earlier than Acts -- Ezekiel's prophecy is in the Old Testament. I had to do some re-reading of Ezekiel; it's not the biblical book to which I typically go for inspiration. I think it's kind of a crazy book -- if you want to see a weird recipe for bread, read Ezekiel chapter 4 -- so I was a little relieved to read in one of my commentaries that in some Jewish traditions, Ezekiel was not to be read by anyone under the age of thirty. I am safely over the limit, in case any of you are concerned.

It's helpful to know a little history: the events referred to in the book put it during the Babylonian exile -- when the city of Jerusalem was conquered, devastated, and occupied. The first Temple of Jerusalem built by David's son Solomon was destroyed, and many of the Jewish political and religious leaders were taken into captivity. Ezekiel was one of these. He was taken into exile before he received the word of the Lord. His situation seemed hopeless -- even worse than that of the apostles in Jerusalem on Pentecost. At least they were free Jews; Ezekiel is far from home, and doesn't know if anyone will remember Israel in the generations to come. And into this seemingly hopeless situation comes the hand and the Word and the Spirit of the Lord.

We are probably most familiar with Ezekiel 37 and the Valley of Dry Bones, but it is just one chapter in the midst of a whole lot of prophesying going on. The word of the Lord keeps showing up and saying, O Mortal (that's Ezekiel) prophesy to . . . whatever. In Chapter 33 it's the people, the house of Israel. In Chapter 34, Ezekiel is to prophesy against the shepherds -- that is the, the false leaders who have taken advantage of the people, in Chapter 35 and 36 to Mount Sier and to the mountains of Israel -- and on it goes. What is consistent in all of these prophecies, is that the word of the Lord is in command. The word of the Lord says, O Mortal, prophesy here, and the mortal gets to it. The word of the Lord does not call a meeting and say, OK, what do *you* think we should do?

The valley of dry bones might have been an actual valley, or it might have been a vision given to the prophet Ezekiel -- we're not told and I don't think it matters. The setting certainly suggests the site of a

battle, of soldiers defeated and either killed or left to die. The bones are dry. They've sat out for years while the flesh and sinew rotted away. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones -- a tough crowd to preach to, for sure -- and by the power of God the bones come together, and are covered with sinew and flesh. But they are still not alive. They are bodies with no breath in them. As you might remember, the Hebrew word *rurach* can mean either breath or spirit. They are bodies with flesh but no spirit.

So God says to Ezekiel -- here, and no where else in all those chapters -- prophesy to the breath, tell the breath to breath upon these bodies and they will live. Let these bodies have Spirit! And they lived and stood on their feet. And God tells Ezekiel that these bones are like the house of Israel which will rise from their graves and live, and return to their homeland and their own soil.

I think I was actually in seminary when I realized that the bones were re-membered. That is what that word literally means: to put together again: God is showing Ezekiel a vision of how his nation and his people will be brought together again and given new life through the Spirit. Every time that we gather, and every time that we pray for one another, we are inviting the Spirit into our midst to re-member the body of Christ. That was the work of the Spirit on Pentecost, to gather and animate a group of people who were discouraged and dispirited.

Ezekiel is a terrific image -- the best zombie story in the Bible. But I want to be sure you understand why I think this story is one we should hear. Let me be clear: I do not think we are a bunch of dried up old bones. That is not who I am, that is not who you are. At the beginning of this sermon I listed some of the things I saw going on here at Creekside just in the past week. That is not the work of dried up bones, that is the work of caring for a grieving family and honoring a friend and reaching out to people in need and making our church property and building a welcoming place. That is not the work of dry bones, that is the work of the Spirit. We are not dried up bones, we are Ezekiel. We are being told to hear and obey the word of the Lord, and to speak that word to whomever the Lord tells us to, even if it may seem a little odd at first. If you say so, Lord.

**Here's what it means to be Ezekiel; to be part of the work of remembering God's people: It means accepting that we are not in charge. We are commanded by the word of the Lord, and we are joining what God has already decided to accomplish; It means that God will show us the vision of what we're to do, and it will be where we are, not someplace else. We will find that vision when we look outside our doors. And finally, we need the breath of the Holy Spirit; it is the Spirit which gives us energy and purpose and hope. It is the Spirit which makes the body of Christ live.**

**Brothers and sisters, in the coming weeks we will be giving you information and asking questions and listening to how the Spirit is moving in our midst to reveal where God is working in our community and how we can partner with God and with our neighbors in ministry. I think I can speak for Diane and Ron in saying that we are excited about sharing this process with you. We want and we need your participation, because the Spirit can speak a prophetic word through any of you, just as the folks from New Mt. Zion Baptist Church heard the Spirit through Ms. Lani Jones and a young man who pointed out his own church in the prophesy of Ezekiel. We want and need you to show up even if you don't think you have anything to say, because the witness of Pentecost is that there is no point speaking in every language under the sun if no one is listening. Ezekiel has to listen for what the word of the Lord tells him to prophesy.**

**The Spirit is up to something, and we need to figure out how we are being called to join in. And that, O Mortals, is the word of the Lord. Amen.**