

7-11-2021 REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS: Always the Neighbor

Isaiah 58:9-12; Acts 8:26-40; Luke 10:29-37

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

July 11, 2021 The Reverend Dr. Mark Fenstermacher

Three weeks ago we began this series of messages by making the obvious point that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a profoundly disruptive event. The last eighteen months have changed us in ways we recognize and in ways we do not yet fully understand.

The question we asked three weeks ago was what will the Church look like as we go forward? What will matter most to us? How will we be different?

We referred back to the story of Nehemiah, in the Hebrew Bible. Nehemiah, a Jew working in the palace of the Persian emperor, left his job, went back to Judea hundreds of miles to the west, secretly inspected the ruined city of Jerusalem, and decided that he would begin rebuilding the city by rebuilding the wall. And the rebuilding of the wall would be something done not by a select small group of experts but all the people -at least those willing to trust the new thing God was doing- would have a part in the construction.

(I need to say something to you. You already know what I'm about to say, but it needs to be said anyway. Last July I arrived as a "part-time transitional lead pastor." I don't know exactly what that is, really.

I know it's not turned out to be a part-time thing. When I arrived, a couple members of the staff asked, "How often will we see you?" I laughed and said, "More than you expect to or may want to. I'm just living down the street." So it's sort of turned into a pretty much full-time thing.

And I know I love being in ministry with you. I find joy in knowing you and being one of your pastors and seeing what God is up to on this corner.

And, finally, I know that what matters most to the future of this congregation has less to do with me and far more to do with you. The person standing in the pulpit has much less impact on the future of the Church here than the people in the pews. I'm throwing my heart into what we are doing with God, but what will matter most is how -and where- you throw your heart, your mind, your money and your time into what God is trying to accomplish.)

Three weeks ago, I shared with you that as the staff and leaders talked and prayed, we came up with three things that we believe matter most in who we are and what we will do.

The first is **Discipleship**. Another way of saying that is knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, following Jesus and serving Jesus. Three weeks ago I said, "It's all about...a Carpenter." If Jesus isn't our truth, our way and our life, then what in the world are we doing at the corner of East 7th and Duesenberg?

To help us remember that it's all about a Carpenter, we've put the image of a pair of **sandals** up on the screens.

Last week, when many of you were out on the lake or grilling hot dogs, we explored the second core value which is **Connection**. We talked about being an Open Place to Grow. The preacher spent a whole lot of time talking about our commitment to be an open community. “Embrace it,” the preacher said. “Don’t be embarrassed or apologetic about our commitment to welcome all people, gay or straight, rich or poor, black or brown or off-white or tan, MSNBC or Fox News, believer or non-believer, male or female or transgender. Embrace it. Let people know we’re doing our best to live out the Great Commandment, loving God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves.”

Last Sunday the preacher reminded us of the song some of us sang as children, “Jesus loves the little children.” The next phrase of that song, we were reminded, is this: “all the children of the world.”

The Carpenter says, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” All.

Being Open is all about being intentional about hospitality. I’m excited about Tammy’s leadership as we do our best to welcome people from the parking lot to the doors of the building to the infant nursery and to the worship space. I’m excited about our conversations that are revolving around how we can welcome people and help them make this Church *their* Church.

To help us remember that we are called to be an Open Place Where It Is Safe to Grow, we’re projecting the image of an open door.

God is calling us not just to be an Open Place but a community where people find **Connection**. I noted, earlier in this series of messages, that many people come to Church not just because it is a place they can attend but because they are looking for community...life-changing relationships.

John Wesley, one of the founders of the Jesus-centered renewal movement we know as Methodism, knew how important connection is. Wesley did everything he could to make sure people were put into small groups or classes or bands. These were groups where people were loved, taught, held accountable, and learned to love God and their neighbor.

The theme song to the old tv series, *Cheers*, was right: everyone wants to go where someone knows your name.

The symbol for **Connection** we’re putting on the screen this morning is a picture of **velcro**. Those interlocking, small “hooks” catch and hold the different pieces of material together. *(Some of you said you were curious what I had in my hand last Sunday, as I was preaching, but never referred to or opened. It was a piece of velcro. I never really got to the Connection part of the sermon, though, and so I never referred to it.)* Velcro is the symbol we are using to represent Connection.

I’ve been told that the roots of **evergreen trees** grow together, and the trees help hold one another up during storms. So I was going to use that as an illustration of Connection and how we were meant to live life connected...with one another...in community.

Then, I did some poking around and found out that Suzanne Simard, professor of forest ecology at the University of British Columbia, says that research shows trees are social creatures. They cooperate with one another. Trees are linked to one another by an underground network of fungi. These function like the neural networks in the human brain. In one study, a Douglas fir that had been injured by insects appeared to send chemical warning signals to a nearby ponderosa pine. The pine tree then produced defensive enzymes to protect against the threatening insect.

The trees were sharing information that was important to the health of the whole forest, the professor says. Trees have been known to share nutrients at critical times to keep each other healthy. Trees in a forest are often linked to each other via an older tree she calls a “mother” or “hub” tree. Seedlings link into the network with the older trees, and the older trees pass along a bit of carbon and nutrients and water that the young seedlings need during a crucial time as they grow.

They are connected. They look out for one another. They help one another grow.

The Bible makes it clear, over and over again, that we were made for Connection and community.

Genesis tells us that it isn't good for the human being to be alone.

Acts 2:42-47, in the New Testament, gives us a snapshot of life in the early Church and that account says that the early believers “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Luke, the writer of Acts, goes on to say “All who believed were together and had all things in common.”

In Romans 12:5, the apostle says “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

Connection.

We are an Open place where it is safe to grow. We are an Open place where people can experience Connection and community.

One of the key things that can happen here, in the Church, in this Open place where people experience Connection and community, is that **we help people take their next step with God.**

Growing in faith, growing in love, learning the art of prayer and hard work of forgiving and speaking the truth in love, takes time. It's a mysterious process and a bit different for each one of us.

Faith takes time.

The story in today's reading from the 8th chapter of Acts is a beautiful story. Why don't you open your Bible to that section of Acts?

One of the disciples is named Philip. The name is Greek which may tell us something about the widening scope of the Christian movement beyond Judaism.

Now you need to know something about hanging out with the LORD: God may lead you in unexpected directions. You may find yourself in places and situations you never dreamed of before you said “Yes” to following Jesus.

Philip is living his life and an angel shows up and tells him to get up and go. God often reminds us that God is a “get up and go” God. Philip is told to go out to a wilderness highway to the south. It's a road that runs southwest from Jerusalem, in the Judean highlands, down to the flat piece of land near the coast called Gaza.

The angel doesn't explain why Philip is going out there to that wilderness road. Sometimes God nudges us and we are asked to take the first step before we have many details about where this developing adventure with God is taking us. God says "Go!" oftentimes and only after we go do we begin to understand the mission.

An Ethiopian eunuch, the secretary of the treasury for the great African kingdom, is riding along in his chariot. The man, whose name we are never given, has been to Jerusalem to worship. So we know he is a Jew. We know he is devout. But we also know that the Jewish worship laws would not have permitted this eunuch, this man with the scared and mutilated body, to enter the Temple. People with scars or who were disfigured were considered damaged and unworthy to approach the holiest places of the Temple. So the man has gone all that way, gotten as close as he could, worshipped, and been told that he wasn't good enough or perfect enough.

The Holy Spirit tells Philip to go up to the chariot, in which the Ethiopian official is reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53 where the prophet refers to someone who is led like a sheep to the slaughter. The court official doesn't understand, and so he asks, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?"

The man, who must be very intelligent, highly educated and extremely wealthy, is puzzled. So Philip explains that the prophet, we Christians believe, is referring to Jesus of Nazareth. Philip tells the Ethiopian the story of Jesus.

The chariot is moving. They are passing some water and the African official says, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" So they go down to the water and Philip baptizes the man.

We are a community where it's all about a Carpenter. (Remember the sandals?)
We are a people who are Open. (Remember the door?)
We are a people where there is Connection with one another and God.
(Remember the velcro?)
We are a community that is all about helping people take their next step with God.

And, finally, we are a people who are all about **Outreach**. Missions and deeds of mercy, acts of kindness and justice, are at the heart of what it means to be the people of Jesus.

To help us remember this, we are using the symbol of **a basin and towel**. We're using a basin and towel because, in the 13th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus gets up after his last supper with his friends, and washes their feet.

He is a good teacher, Jesus is. And he knows that sometimes a lesson is learned better when we see it acted out. Instead of just telling them -once more- about being a servant to others, Jesus gets up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a servant's apron around his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples.

Foot washing was sometimes considered beneath even a servant. Some considered it particularly humiliating. Jesus washes their feet. He washes the feet of

every last one of them. Jesus washes the feet of Simon Peter, who will soon enough deny even knowing the Carpenter. Jesus washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, who is about to slip out into the night, betray his friend, and lead the Temple guards straight to Jesus.

We are a servant community.

Last week I talked about the Church as a community whose heart breaks for broken people.

Broken people, poverty, and real need can be hard to find in a community like Dekalb County. You have to look. You have to listen. You have to dig beneath the surface of our affluence. The need is there. The hurt is there. The brokenness is there. And the need for hope, the need for community, the need for good news and for someone who will help set the captives free, is there.

Jesus, in the 10th chapter of Luke, tells one of his most famous stories as he answers a puffed up lawyer who has asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

The Carpenter tells the story about the traveler who is taking the winding, dangerous road from Jerusalem in the highlands down to Jericho. Jesus doesn't mention that the man was traveling in a caravan with others. Apparently, in this story, the man was traveling alone. Which was reckless and foolish. The roads and open country of first century Palestine were infested with bandits and revolutionaries. No one in their right mind would travel from Jerusalem to Jericho on their own.

The reason I am pointing out this detail is because we tend to come up with excuses about why other people don't deserve our help or money. We like to explain how poverty or addiction or homelessness is because of poor decisions on the part of those who are in trouble.

In every single discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan I have ever been a part of, a surprising number of people want to talk about all the reasons why people in need may not really deserve our help or money. People want to talk about "those people" and their bad choices. How their own repeated foolishness has put them right where they are. We hear the Parable of the Good Samaritan and we often are tempted to explain why this guy shouldn't have been traveling alone and why should we risk our own safety by slowing down, pulling over and helping?

In the story Jesus tells, people come down the road. The professionally trained theologians, the preachers and teachers of the law, won't stop. The good, synagogue-attending Jews won't stop. Everyone is passing by, playing it safe, not getting involved, and then the last person in the world you'd think would do the right thing -a Samaritan-stops, binds up the man's wounds, and brings him to safety and shelter.

Some Jews referred to Samaritans as having less value than a dog. If the shadow of a Samaritan crossed the shadow of a devout Jew, the devout Jew was considered -by some- to be unclean.

The last person in the world who you would think would do the right thing does the right thing. It's like a car full of preachers swerving to avoid someone in crisis, because they have important things to attend to. The person who stops to help is the owner of the strip club on Coliseum or the woman running a CBD shop or the skinhead with a racist tattoo on his upper arm.

The story is telling us that we are always the neighbor.

Where is the hurt, where is the need and how can we help?

Over the last year, God has shown us something with our Wednesday night food ministry. A meal that was once, generally, for members of the congregation, served inside the building, has now become a mission of feeding hungry people. Every week. Not only are hungry people fed, but volunteers walk along, greet people as they sit in their cars, ask how they are doing, and then ask if there is some way we can pray for them. Do they have a need in their life or is there a need in the life of a friend we can be praying for?

The food ministry has now led to a pantry ministry.

And God is leading us into a dialogue with others who are looking to find the hurting people in our world and figure out wise and generous and loving ways to help.

Not only are we excited about our *Faith in Action* Sunday mornings, we are equally excited about the possibility of becoming a congregation where deeds of service and acts of kindness are just a part of our life...as a group and as individuals.

Last week I was in Columbus, Ohio and drove past the United Methodist Church for All People. I've heard about that inner city ministry for years. The congregation has a Fresh Market that has distributed fresh produce to more than 2,000 households every week for over 10 years.

Right before the COVID-pandemic hit, the Church purchased an abandoned drive-through beer store. When people couldn't come onto the fresh market, because of COVID precautions, people began driving through the old beer store. Volunteers would place boxes of fresh produce in the trunks of people's cars. Katelin, the church's music director, says, "It's a drive-through all over again, but now all the coolers that used to hold beer have eggs, fruit and vegetables."

The Church for All People, because of the United Methodist support that we and hundreds of other churches provide, has a "Thrive to Five" program that focuses on the well-being of babies and new mothers. Through "Thrive to Five" the Church provides formula and diapers to people who can't afford either.

When children couldn't attend in-person classes, the the Church for All People helped deliver tablets and laptop computers to children who didn't have a computer in their homes.

One leader of the church, Mike Premo, said, "During this time we can either turn inward and focus on ourselves only, or we can turn outward and focus on our community.

Always the Neighbor.

Christ calls us to be Always the Neighbor.

It's about Discipleship...knowing and following the Carpenter. It's about being Open.

It's about Connection. It's about helping people take their next step with God.

It's about Always being the Neighbor...finding life as we give our life away for God...and all God's children.

Is this a journey you'll take...is this an adventure you just might sign up for? You might change the world. And God might change you in the process. What will you say? What will you do?