

***REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS: It's about a Carpenter
Isaiah 58:6-12; Ephesians 4:11-16; John 1:10-18, 35-43***

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
June 27, 2021 The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

St Mary's Church: The Fire and the Rebuilding

Those of you who have been around northeast Indiana for awhile may remember what happened on September 2nd, 1993 in downtown Fort Wayne. Lightning struck the historic, beautiful building where the people of St. Mary's Catholic Church gathered, and set it blaze.

Battalion Chief Dennis Jines, who was a young firefighter at the time, still thinks about that fire all these years later. "It's unfortunately one of the fires that you remember your whole career, what you were doing, and when you were doing it," Jines says.

Jines was at Station 9 when the call came in that day. The fire began when lightning hit near the church's steeple. Rain kept falling as firefighters fought for more than four hours, but despite their efforts the church building -not the church but the church building- was lost.

A new, smaller and more modern, church building was built where the great, old church had once stood. It better fits the mission of the congregation, I've been told, than the beautiful old building. There are pieces of the old building still on the site. The two steeple crosses from the old building that burned were saved, and they now stand near the front doors.

About ten years ago, according to a report from WANE 15 tv three years ago, the high altar and the candlesticks from the old building were also saved and placed in the new building. "We don't have a lot," Father Phillip A. Widmann, said three years ago. "Not a lot was salvaged, but those things were."

The congregation remains strong.

"The congregation has remained together," the priest said, "(and) I think that's an important factor to keep in mind, amid all the trials and tribulations of rebuilding."

You may not know this, but all the way back in 1886 the St. Mary's building was destroyed by an explosion. The people rebuilt. They started over. They designed something new for a new day.

The Pandemic: a Profound Disruption

I remember driving around downtown Fort Wayne, after the fire, and joining the rest of the city in mourning what had been lost. Then, like so many in the area, after the time of mourning I began to wonder what the future held for the congregation on that corner.

We've not been set on fire by lightning, but our nation -and the world- has been struck by another kind of natural disaster: COVID-19. A virus turned our world upside-down in all sorts of ways. Lives were lost, normal everyday rhythms at home and work and play were altered, we suddenly felt more vulnerable and our existence more fragile.

What this means, how it has changed how we see life and medicine and education and one another, we can't fully know our understand right now. We're too close to the event of the pandemic.

The pandemic has been a profoundly disrupting event in education, healthcare, business, politics and in the world of faith...religion.

After the Pandemic: Who Will We Be and What Will Matter Most?

So here is the question: as we come out of this exile, as we come out of the wilderness that has been this pandemic, what kind of church will we be? What will this community of faith, located on the corner of East 7th Street and Duesenberg, look like? What will we do? What will we value? How will we be different?

I believe God is giving us an opportunity. I believe God is giving us an opportunity to be the church we have always called to be. I believe God is giving us the opportunity rediscover the basics of what it means to be the church.

So what does the future look like?

What does the future look like for us?

For months, our church staff and some of our lay leadership have been talking about what really matters to God as we go forward. We've talked and prayed, about what the essentials should be for us in this coming season of our life, and we have kept coming back to three core elements that we believe should make:

Discipleship (another way of looking at that is knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, serving Jesus and following Jesus).

Connection. (Other words for that are community and hospitality).

And, **Outreach.** (Other words for that are missions and acts of kindness and mercy.)

Drip Irrigation: A Church Where the Resources are Strategic

This week, I find myself thinking about the concept, the reality, of drip-irrigation. (*Honestly, sometimes I never know what is going to pop into my head...*) Drip irrigation is a kind of micro-irrigation system that saves water by letting water drip slowly to the roots of plants. Water isn't wasted but it is focused right where the water is needed most. The water is used in such a way that it has maximum impact...leads to surprising yields for the amount of water used.

I saw God inviting us to direct our resources, like a farmer utilizing drip irrigation, to a few key places that God can use to have a maximum impact on our community and world.

We don't just spray our resources all over the fields, the way churches have tended to do, saying "yes" to every good idea whether or not it works or lines up with our mission and vision, but we focus on time and our money and our prayers on a few key areas. One of the toughest things for any church to do, for any pastor to do, is to say "No" to good ideas so that we can say "Yes" to the best...the essential...that are key to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It's like churches that do everything, managing property and budgets and staffs and full calendars but they never really get around to helping people take their next step with God.

Look at the calendar of too many churches and you'll find precious little attention to helping people learn how to pray, or learn how to give, or learn the amazing, mysterious God stories we find in the Bible, or learn the basic lessons Jesus taught.

So we kept coming back to these words:

Discipleship (another way of saying that is knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, following Jesus and serving Jesus);

Connection (other words would be Community and Hospitality);

And, Outreach (other words for that are Missions and acts of kindness).

It's About a Carpenter

So here is what I believe to be true: the church is always about, first, last and always, a Carpenter. Not just any carpenter but the Carpenter who was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, and baptized by John in the water of the Jordan River. I believe the church is always about the Carpenter who traveled from one end of the country to the other, teaching and preaching and healing and taking on the bigots and spiritual powerbrokers. I believe the church is always about the Carpenter who made a point of taking detours through territories where the rejected and the outcasts lived. I believe the church is always about the Carpenter who not only engaged in long conversations with lawyers and preachers but also welcomed children. I believe the church is always about the Carpenter who hung out with rascals and prostitutes and lepers and losers, as well as the bright shiny people who are seen by the world as winners. He offered them all the fullness of God's grace and truth. He partied with them all as he shared the grace and truth of God. He invited them not just into a moment of decision, a moment of existential trust, but he invited them into a lifelong journey.

It's about this Carpenter.

It's about knowing him, loving him, following him and serving him.

Nehemiah: Starting with the Basics

The book of Nehemiah is a book in the Hebrew Bible that tells us about a palace aide to the Persian King Artaxerxes I, in the middle of the 5th century before the birth of Christ. Judea, back in Palestine, had been partially repopulated by thousands of Jews who had been released from their Babylonian exile. The people went home, after the profoundly disruptive and painful experience of exile. Instead of finding Jerusalem the way they dreamed it would be, they found it to be a shattered city. It was a wild and unruly place with broken buildings, where people tried to survive.

The city's walls had been partially destroyed, and the portion still standing had been allowed to deteriorate. Which was a terrible thing for an ancient city. It meant they were always at the mercy of an attacking army or band of thieves. Not having solid city walls, so you could protect yourself against your enemies and control access to the city, was like trying to live safe in a house without a front door.

Nehemiah, although safe and secure in the Persian palace, far to the East of Judea, had a dream about his homeland. He could not rest until he went back home, back to Judea, and helped rebuild the city. The Persian king gave Nehemiah permission to return home, and when he arrived there he began to rebuild the city walls. He told the city residents they would rebuild the walls together. This wasn't going

to be a project a small cadre of highly paid experts would do, but this would be something they would all do together. (*Which is the way it is supposed to be in the church: not a few on staff with key leaders making the church go, but everyone together being the church...rebuilding...creating a new future.*)

The first place Nehemiah started was the rebuilding the city walls. There would be more work to do, and he would do that. Under his leadership, the southern Jewish kingdom of Judea underwent a moral reformation, an ethical reformation, and there was a renewed emphasis on passionate, faithful, informed worship of the Lord God YHWH.

Nehemiah began with the walls. The walls were first. If the walls weren't right, then nothing else would be right.

We believe, as we come out of the pandemic, Jesus must be first. If we don't get this right, if we don't let the message, personality, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth be the center of our life, then nothing else will be right.

If he is not our way, if he is not our truth, if he is not our life, then what are we doing here on the corner of East 7th Street and Duesenberg?

Living for God: Lives that Glow in the Darkness

In the 58th chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet is speaking to a nation that likes to think it is faithful to the Lord God YHWH. The truth is, though, people show up for worship rituals but they are living immoral, unfaithful, greedy lives the rest of the week. The truth is that they offer fancy prayers and place expensive sacrifices on the altar, but God isn't impressed because their hearts are really far from God. There seems to be no connection between the words of praise they offer in worship and the way they do business during the week.

The people wonder why God seems far away. The truth is, of course, their relationship with God is a shallow, pretend thing. *They are far away from God!*

So the prophet tells them the uncomfortable truth. Isaiah points out the unfaithfulness of the people, and then he talks about what would happen if the people turned to God in an honest, real way.

The prophet says that if the people will practice compassion and justice and integrity in their business dealings, if they will stop gossiping about one another and trashing one another, and if they will act compassionately towards those who are in need, feeding the hungry and giving themselves to the down-and-outers, their lives -these are the words of the prophet- "will begin to glow in the darkness (and their shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.)"

If we live for God, and we show our love for God in the way we treat others, then God will give us a full life in the emptiest of places.

God will use the rubble of the past to build something new. God will use the rubble of the past to rebuild the foundations. God will restore the old ruins, rebuild and renovate "and make the community livable again."

We have a God who, even as we come out of this pandemic, even as the life of the mainline Christian community in North America seems to be fading, even as we look back and see how we might have had more of an impact on Dekalb County and the world, can use the rubble of our past to rebuild the foundation, restore the old ruins, "and make the community livable again."

This passage from Isaiah 58, in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, is so beautiful that I would like you to read it with me:

***"If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people's sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You'll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You'll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.***

A Come and See Community: It's about the Carpenter

What does it look like to be a community that is all about Jesus, that is focused and intentional about helping people meet him, know him, understand him, follow him and serve him?

Well, look at the reading this morning from the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John. The last part of today's Gospel reading begins at verse 35. Jesus, in the middle of his life, is out on the eastern edge of Judea. He's down south, far from his home up in the hills of northern Galilee, and a part of the crowds that have come out to hear his relative, John the Baptist, preaching up a storm of repentance and renewal. Jesus is walking around down there, soaking up the truth John has to share with the world, and in verse 35 the Baptizer is standing with two of his disciples. John sees Jesus walk by, and John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples of John hear this comment, and they go walking after Jesus. They are curious. If John the Baptist says this carpenter from the north country is the "Lamb of God," then they want to see what he is all about.

Jesus realizes he has a couple of John's disciples following him, and he turns around. He looks at them. And Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?"

Isn't that a question he might ask each and every one of us?

"What are you looking for?"

They don't really know what they're looking for. It's hard to put into words, isn't it? If someone were to ask us what we're looking for, we might say "home." Or we might say "love." Or we might say "purpose." Or we might say, "I'm looking for a

glimpse of the One who is behind the stars and time itself.” Or we might say, “I’m looking for grace. I’m looking for a second chance. I’m looking for a new beginning.”

“What are you looking for?”

The two men stammer around and they say something almost silly: “Rabbi, where are you staying?”

Sometimes, we can’t say what is really on our mind and what is in our heart. It’s too risky. Too revealing. We don’t want to risk that kind of vulnerability. Jesus asks them what they are looking for, and they mutter, “Where are you staying?”

Jesus says, “Come and see.”

The two men stayed with Jesus into the evening. They began to get to know Jesus.

One of the two men who followed Jesus that day, staying with him into the evening, was named Andrew. Andrew, after spending time with Jesus, went to his brother, Simon Peter, and said, “We have found the Messiah.” John tells us that Andrew brings his brother, Simon Peter, to Jesus and introduces him to the Carpenter.

See how that works?

We follow Jesus. We spend some time with Jesus. And, then, when it is right, we become a community that invites others to “Come and see.”

The next day Jesus heads north up into Galilee. He sees someone named Philip (*which is a Greek name*), and says, “Follow me.”

It’s about a Carpenter: this is what the church is about.

The church is a community where the person, message, and way of Jesus connects us, controls us, shapes us, and fills us. Jesus and the way of Jesus always have the last word for us. Not the dollar bill. Not the government. Not a political party. Not hate. Not racism. Not fear. Not addiction. Not tribalism. Jesus always has the last word.

This past week, at the Fine Arts Camp, I had the amazing privilege of leading the children in a five to seven minute devotional time on Monday and Tuesday. The first day I asked them what they see in the universe, beyond people, that makes them go “Wow!” We talked about creation. And how God is behind all the amazing “Wow!” moments.

On Tuesday, we were to talk about how God cares for creation. I asked the children, “Do you have any hobbies?” They told me about their hobbies. One girl makes bracelets. One girl sews. One boy cooks with his father. One boy works on remote control cars. One boy makes toys with his Dad.

I then asked the children, “When you are done making something, do you ever stop and just study what you have made...what you have created?”

They tend not to do that, they told me.

I mentioned to them that God made everything, Genesis tells us, and that after God made the oceans and the stars and the impala and whales and elephants and music and the fields, God stood back, studied what he had made, and said, “Wow. That is very good.”

“When God made you,” I said, “God stood back, took one look at you, and said, ‘This is very good.’ The truth is that Psalm 139 says God knew you when you were in

your mother's womb. God knew you before you were born, and God stood back and said, 'This is very good.'

"I want you to know this," I told them. "I want you to know this. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise because you're not tall enough or big enough or fast enough or rich enough or thin enough or boy enough or girl enough. Don't let anyone tell you that you're not enough because God looks at you and says, 'This is very good.'"

Now, do you know why I can say that sort of thing to those children with that kind of confidence? I can say that because I know the Carpenter. I know the cross. And I know the empty tomb.

How will we rebuild? Where will we start? Who -or what- will matter most to us? Well, you see, it's about this Carpenter...