

Sermon for Sunday, September 8, 2019

GOD'S GAS STATION

During four and a half decades of pastoral ministry, I have been required to write a Statement of Faith several times. I have always started my testimony with one simple claim. I love the Church. Why? Because the church - at its best - is the resurrected Body of Christ - a fragile, cherished beacon of hope in a broken, bruised, and unfinished world.

Now Church - with a capital C - often takes shape in the particularity and peculiarity of individual congregations. And I have a mosaic of congregational images on my faith journey - the red pew cushions in the First Presbyterian Church of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, where I learned to worship as a toddler. The warm adobe womb of the sanctuary in Redlands California where I was confirmed at age 12. The old weathered stones of the Wellesley College Chapel where I received my call to pastoral ministry. The huge barn of a worship space in Allentown Pennsylvania where an indulgent congregation helped a newly ordained pastor learn how to preach. The clapboard simplicity of the New Jersey congregation that welcomed my husband and me as Co-Pastors. The gifted people of the Bethesda congregation who cracked open both my heart and mind, and were co-creators in a transformational ministry. The dozens of congregations I visited in rural America and urban America and suburban America the year I served as General Assembly Moderator - and the global communities of faith in South Africa and Ethiopia and Argentina and Colombia and Syria and Lebanon and the West Bank. Here in St. Louis, where my husband and I have lived for 4 years, I have been changed by the multi-cultural beauty of Second Presbyterian Church, and the energetic witness of Webster Groves Presbyterian Church. Each congregation I have served has been a gift and a revelation, and I can hardly wait to see how Ladue Chapel will transform my faith and my life.

Though the congregations I have enjoyed over the years are all tethered by buildings, it, of course, has been the people who have taught me about church - and about the alternative reality we Christians are called to offer a broken, sinful, and hurting world. When I used to teach Confirmation Class, I would encourage the teenagers to come up with metaphors for the church - something other than dry, dusty theological language. And the results could be quite creative. The church is a hospital for sinners. The church is a laboratory for living. The church is a community of spiritual friends. But my favorite metaphor given to me by a squirrely teenager was this - the church is a gas station. Yes, the church is the place and the people that fill us up week in and week out - so we can travel far and wide to create the reign of God on earth.

Ephesians 4 is one of my top 5 passages of scripture. Most likely written by a disciple of the Apostle Paul, these words suggest that being the Body of Christ, together, is one tall order.

As we know from Paul's writings, the early groups of Christian believers were somewhat of a mess - constantly arguing and jockeying for power - the rich ignoring the poor, the Jewish Christians condescending to the Gentiles, rude and impatient behavior destroying community

meals, men and women bickering about food and gender roles, and the constant arguing about the purpose of the church. Is the church a group of friends gathered for mutual support – or is the church a community of baptized servant leaders, sent out to transform the pain of the world into abundance for all?

But then, amidst all this squabbling and anxiety and confusion, we hear a voice cutting through the static and calling us back to accountability. Hey, folks, grow up, says Ephesians. The question for the followers of Jesus is urgent. Are you – are we - leading lives that are worthy of our high calling – worthy of the unconditional love, the radical generosity, the extravagant grace that God gives us?

The main theme of this passage is unity – spoken amidst deep division and partisan ugliness. Did you hear it? 7 times the writer uses the word ONE – one Body, one Spirit, one faith, one hope, one Lord, one baptism, one God. And yet, my friends, the last thing unity means in scripture is uniformity. In fact, diversity is the paradoxical essence of unity. Growing toward unity amidst diversity is the central task of the Church – and the central task of human life. And so, it seems that all that bickering in the early church was absolutely essential for the church to grow. We are called to honor and learn to live with those who are not like us.

Yesterday your Session and professional staff and Pastor Nominating Committee met with a consultant to discover the results of the questionnaire that over 300 of you answered during the month of August – a high response rate compared to other congregations who have participated in this exercise. In the weeks you will be hearing more about this and will receive a summary of the results and an invitation to participate in a Conversation Group. As is always the case when God's people share their opinions there are differences among you. 50% of you are basically satisfied with the way things are – and 50% of you have many suggestions for building on your strengths and moving in some new directions. There is wide agreement that bringing in new families with children is essential – but not all of you agree with some of the changes those young families are suggesting. And there is much more. The point being that there is diversity of opinion and dreams in this unique congregation – and maintaining one Lord, one faith, one baptism in this place will demand good listening and lots of love.

And so,, Paul reminds us that as Christians, finding our oneness – maintaining the unity of the Spirit - is not easy and it is not without turbulence. Why? Because, as Ephesians exhorts us, we are called to speak the truth in love – not gooey, flattering love – but bone hard honest love. Will Willimon – former Dean of the Duke Chapel – has often said that the problem with the church is that we are too nice. The Gospel does not call us to niceness, he says, but to faithfulness. And so speaking the truth is essential and doing it with love is non-negotiable – as long as we understand the New Testament meaning of love. Love does not mean sweet talk. It means wishing the best for the other no matter what – even if it means saying things that others may not want to hear.

As the fourth chapter of Ephesians concludes, we find out the purpose of this unity, the purpose of this honesty ethic. Our purpose is to build up. It is to grow in maturity. It is to keep on keeping on – becoming more and more each day – the people and the community that God created us to be. It means growing to “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

Friends, I offer these words about Church today to set the stage for the transitional period stretching before us. I know that there are some of you who wonder why, with such a strong and talented staff, why does Ladue Chapel even need an Interim Pastor? But I hope that you will find

that these next 12 to 18 months can be fun and creative and surprising. It has been over 10 years since you completed your last all church strategic plan – and the world around us has changed during that time. Ladue Chapel is not the same – and neither is God’s dream for this special place.

Consider the wisdom of both scripture and agricultural science. In order for fields to remain fertile, it is essential that every so often they lie fallow – allowed to rest and rejuvenate – turning over the soil and allowing fresh nutrients to revitalize the earth for new and abundant growth. Studies have shown that congregations who embrace the possibilities, the courageous conversations – even some changes - during an interim period have by far the most successful new pastorates after the transition. And so I invite you to join with me in this fallow time - nurturing good and nutritious soil for your future ministries.

For the next two or three months, let’s take the time to be curious together – to ask good questions. When you look in the mirror, what does Ladue Chapel look like today – not yesterday? What is a realistic number for your active membership? What is unique about Ladue Chapel and what do you do better than anyone else? And what does that say about who God is asking you to become and who God is asking you to serve? When you look out the window, in West County and throughout the greater St. Louis area, what is breaking God’s heart? And how can the tremendous resources of this smart, wealthy and gifted congregation - how can you help God heal that brokenness?

Friends, I believe God is calling those of us who love church – those of us who cannot live without church – God is calling us to be a holy gas station - providing an alternative energy source of unity and truth and love and justice to fill up a world that is running on fumes of anxiety and despair.

Anne Lamott tells the story of a little girl who got lost. She was picked up by a police officer who drove her around her neighborhood. Suddenly, she asked the officer to stop and let her out. She pointed across the street and said, “That is my church. And I can always find my way home from here.”

Friends it is a privilege and a joy for me to be with you during this transitional time. Thank you for inviting me into your home.

May God bless and keep us as together we continue to grow into maturity - into the full stature of Christ.

May it be so. Amen.

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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
September 8, 2019
TEXT: Selections from Ephesians 4