

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 10, 2016

First Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Psalm 37:1-9

Acts 2:1-2

The Master's Plan - A Master Plan: Foundation

Several years ago, the Church Council (our church's governing body), very aware of the needs we have as a church re: our building (accessibility issues and deferred maintenance needs), formed a **Facilities Task Force**, whose job was to assess the current state of our buildings and our needs for improvements.

That list was long and overwhelming! And when it went back to the Council, they did not know where to begin, except to say "In order to address all this, we're going to need a Capital Campaign to raise the funds." Which begged a question - "How do we decide what is most important here?" followed closely by, "Why? What is so important about our church that we need to raise the funds to make improvements?"

THAT is a big question! And so in good Protestant / Congregational form, we formed another "committee" - the **GPS** (God's Purpose Seekers) - to explore the BIG question of WHY? WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE?

And after a year+ of praying, reading, listening, talking, the GPS folk asked us to gather around the purpose of *Sharing Christ - Changing Lives*. This came out of a survey you participated in more than a year ago now.

More recently they asked HOW do we Share Christ and Change Lives? And we identified three primary ways (also from the survey):

- Creating a Christian foundation for families
- Learning more about Jesus
- Living our faith beyond our walls

To use the building analogy:

- Foundation - Christ
- Structure - Learning about Christ
- Windows - Sharing Christ

And so, in the last year, we've increased opportunities to learn and serve. Yes! That's what we should be spending our time on. So with Christ as our focus, our common denominator, it seems we are ready to pursue the issues of our facilities' needs.

So the Council again launched another "committee" - **Facilities Steering Team**.

This group - small and **FaST** - are the overseers and drivers of the different parts and pieces of a potential building project. We begin by gathering information:

- Realtors - who will tell us the value the Parish House/land - and suggest ideas for its role in our future;
- Architects - How do we approach a large scale building project to fulfill our purpose?;
- YOU - at a Dream Big conversation on Jan. 24, when we'll ask "What do we need to fulfill our purpose of *Sharing Christ - Changing Lives?*"

All of this is the on-ramp to a Master Plan, which is a physical rendering of what a building project might look like in answer to these questions. And it is very exciting!

And so to prepare for the conversation on Jan. 24 - we need to think more fully about our purpose and how we live it out; and to be reminded that any Master Plan we develop, needs to actually be **THE MASTER'S PLAN** for us!

So this Sunday and the next two we'll focus on the three ways we go about *Sharing Christ and Changing Lives* here:

- Creating a Christian foundation for families
- Learning more about Jesus
- Living our faith beyond our walls

It's easy, when thinking about family life these days, to compare it to a generation (or two or three) ago! And we usually do this with a heavy sigh and a good dose of nostalgia. *When I was a kid...* There are plenty of memes out there that list all the things WE did as kids - without helmets, seat belts, hand sanitizer, over-scheduled Saturdays - and we turned out okay.

Some will say that kids have it harder now than a generation ago - temptations, pressures and dangers of a new and different sort. The pot kids smoke now is not the same stuff that was smoked in the 70's.

There are parents who suffer from FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and sign their kids up for everything...

Families are different now than they were a generation or two or three ago. And Christian families in particular have a particular challenge. Sure we have busy schedules and for many Sunday is the only day to sleep in...We also have many other things we could be doing - scouts activities, birthday parties, soccer games, ice time...

But I'm not sure that even if we moved church to 4:00pm that we'd see a significant increase in attendance. I'm not even sure that simply "attending church" is what Christian families really need. If church / Christian faith is something that we "fit in" to our already busy lives, it doesn't matter much when we gather for worship, our relationship with God will always come second, third, or fourth.

I think it is harder to be a Christian now than in previous times.

And it's hard for those of a certain age to be understanding toward those of a younger age, for whom the struggle is real. And it's hard for those of a younger age to see why they might make different choices.

When I was in college, I was in the orchestra (I played percussion). Every time we played - rehearsals and performances - began the same way. The players would wander on to the stage in no particular order, take their seats, place music on stands, and begin warming up by

playing whatever it was they wanted. Some would play scales, some exercises, eventually drifting toward particularly difficult passages or phrases from the music at hand.

It sounded like chaos - because it was chaos! No two people playing the same thing at the same time. People playing in different keys.

And then after a while, the concert master/mistress would stand and look at the first oboe player, who would play an A-440. And then the woodwinds would all play an A as well, adjusting headpieces until they matched the note precisely. Then another A and it was the brass players' turn. And finally a third A and the string players. Since we in the percussion section had nothing to tune, we'd often join in.... and then start bending the note to mess with the 2nd violins who sat right in front of us.

Then, and only then, would the conductor appear. And now that the orchestra was tuned to the same pitch, we could play sounding beautifully.

It's like that in the church as well. The task of the church is to help people hear the same note; to hear the same message from Jesus; to tune our hearts to Jesus' heart. Once we all hear the same note, although we are all playing different instruments, we can come together to make great music.

Jesus is our A-440. And we need to hear him above all the other sounds ringing out around us. And when the note begins to fade, we need to perk up and listen again for him.

When the first followers of Jesus were still reeling from the traumatic events surrounding Jesus' death, his resurrection and all the time they spent with him in his resurrected body, and then his disappearing from them and going back to heaven, and then the emptiness of losing him again, they were all in Jerusalem for a festival.

It was chaos, people from all over - different ethnicities, different countries, speaking different languages... when suddenly there was a rush of wind and the Holy Spirit - sounding perhaps a little like an oboe - appeared looking like fire, and causing the disciples to speak in different languages so that all the visitors to the city could understand what they were saying about Jesus.

Listen for him, he will speak so you can understand.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, wise friends, we need to tune our lives to Jesus. When we hear his sound cut through all the others, we will have what we need for that moment.

Hear again these words from Psalm 37 we read:

*Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.*

When we take delight in the Lord, he gives us the desires of our heart; not because God starts thinking like we do, but because, as we get closer to Him, His desires become our desires.

To put it another way - we will never be tuned to the right pitch if we try to fit God into our lives. Rather we need to have our lives shaped by Him.

The foundation that families, and all people need, is Jesus. And here's why.... Because Jesus gives us what we need. And while we might/could make a list of ten or twenty things we need from Jesus, the top three on my list are:

Forgiveness

- deep forgiveness that doesn't stockpile resentment
- that is so stunning it strengthens relationships for the long haul
- that sounds like "neither do I condemn you" providing respite for a guilty heart

Encouragement

- not just a cliché quotation on your facebook newsfeed, but strength for the big disappointments
- the kind of encouragement that says, "get up and walk - your faith has healed you"
- the "I-can-do-all-things-through-Christ-who-strengthens-me" kind of encouragement

Hope

- the far-reaching kind that manifests as peace even though the actual path forward is rocky at best and *Tough Mudder*™ at worst
- that assures us that our future is as much in God's hands as today is
- which is that spark of life which remains when we've run out of optimism

Only Jesus Christ can provide any of this for us, let alone ALL of it and then some, in abundance and beyond measure (which he does!).

The purpose of the church - of THIS church - is to declare THAT.
To tune our lives and our life to His A...
To have our hearts shaped by His desires rather than our own.

Then, and only then, will our Master Plan be THE Master's Plan.

Amen.