

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 24, 2016

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 24:18-22

Acts 2:43-3:10

## **The Master's Plan — A Master Plan: *Living Our Faith Beyond Our Walls***

This is week three of my little series working our way through the three ways we go about *Sharing Christ and Changing Lives* here at Union Congregational Church of Groton.

Creating a Christian foundation for families

Learning more about Jesus

Living our faith beyond our walls

As we prepare to discuss our potential building project, we need to have an understanding of why we need to improve the situation with our buildings.

And this week — *Living Our Faith Beyond Our Walls* — really gets to it. Because, if everything we do here is for our benefit, we might as well take down the sign out front, because we would no longer be a Christian church.

Maybe I'm stating the obvious, but it's important, so I'll say it anyway — what makes the church the church is that we are called and gathered, to steward and share, that which is NOT of our own making.... the love of God given in Jesus Christ.

We have been given gifts of amazing grace, and unconditional love, and repeated forgiveness, and the peace that passes all understanding, and hope that defies logic, and abundant life, and joy even during the tough times, and acceptance no matter what we've done, and love, did I mention the love of God in Jesus?

And you know what — these gifts are not just for us... They're for EVERYONE! But how will ANYONE know, if we don't tell them? Or if we stay so focused on ourselves that we can't look much beyond the next committee meeting or budget cycle.

Mismanaging God's gifts in this way is all too easy for the church — any church — and when that happens, the body of Christ (a living thing) becomes an institution ruled by habits rather than by hearts.

At our best, we remember who we really are and who we are called to be. At our worst, we lose sight of the vision of community that Christ shows us, missing the mark in being a community of love, justice, and service in Christ's name.

Making disciples is to be in the seed-planting, good-news sharing business. We offer what Christ first offers us: the potential of a better way, a better life, a more satisfying journey. We invite people to know and experience God and His grace, and to be changed by Him. Being faithful is our calling as individuals; and the church provides the framework of carrying out that faithfulness in community.

Today's reading from Acts is a snapshot of the early church sharing faithfully in community together. It is a window into how community in the Christian tradition is meant to be. They eat together. They share their possessions and resources. There is no need. There is no want. There is no one left out. There is no one alone. There is no one not welcome at the table. There is always room for one more. This is the kingdom of God!

And the kingdom of heaven is not some abstract place up above. The kingdom of heaven is God's kingdom whenever and wherever two or more of the faithful share in love. Whether in foxholes or fancy sanctuaries, the kingdom of heaven can be in our midst.

A young man was knocking on the glass doors of a church early one Tuesday morning. A senior adult happened to be inside setting up for a meeting, but she went to the door to talk to the man. Being alone, she didn't want to let him in, so she asked what he needed and discerned that he was in spiritual and emotional pain and in need of the pastor. So she called the pastor who came to the church and learned that he needed a translator to speak with him. So the pastor found a translator, and they sat with the young man as he poured out the pain of his story.

Being from another country, he did not know anyone here except some shady coworkers who had been a bad influence upon him. His mother had told him that whenever he needed help he should go to a church, so he stopped when he saw the cross on the building. As the weeks unfolded they connected the man to a Spanish-speaking church near his home. He was baptized, and soon after answered a call to ministry, went to seminary and became an ordained pastor.

So many things could have stood in the way of this young man. That first woman could have chosen not to be bothered by a persistent visitor knocking on a locked door before office hours. The pastor could have told him to come back another time. The translator could have said he was too busy at work. The pastor to whom he was referred could have chosen not to devote the time required at this critical point of his spiritual journey. But because people chose to respond in kind—to respond with the same grace and faith that God gave each one of us—a life was touched and changed.

The heart of the church of Jesus Christ is not rules but relationships. We all are a part of the body of Christ and each of us has a role that is so very important in it. But whatever we do, sharing Christ's love and joy is the most important thing we do.

Because before God can move through us, he must first move in us. (B. Houston)

The story goes about a man and his wife who were endowing a scholarship for students at an elite university. The man was a successful physician and had grown up in a family that gave him everything that was really important — they loved him, they encouraged him, and they helped him dream great dreams. They gave him everything that really mattered, but they were also very poor.

When he got into high school, he decided he wanted a great education, so he applied to a private, elite university. He got back a letter stating he would be put on a waiting list. He was not accepted, but he was not rejected, they simply said maybe. This was in 1966.

When September came, he still had not heard from them. It was almost time to begin school, so he decided to take matters into his own hands. He packed up his bags, got on a train, and went to the big city. There he caught a taxi and went to a large hotel downtown. He walked up to the front desk and said he needed a room. The front-desk manager looked

at him and asked if he had a reservation. The young man didn't even know that that's what you did. He had never traveled before.

The front desk manager asked, "Where are you from, kid?" and he explained. Then the manager explained to him that this was Labor Day weekend and they didn't have any rooms. But he said the young man could stay in the back with the bellman where they had a cot. He didn't want to see an eighteen-year-old kid fresh from the country out on the streets of downtown.

The young man said he would never forget the kindness of that front-desk manager. The next day he showed up at the admissions office to see the dean. He didn't even have an appointment. He just announced that he wanted to see him and that he wasn't leaving until he did. He said all he wanted was an opportunity and he promised to excel if he was given that chance. The dean was so impressed with his tenacity that he looked up his file and after reviewing it said, "OK, you're in."

Well, he did very well at school, graduated, got into medical school, and went on to be a very successful physician. This young man, in his 50s and reflecting on his life, when he presented the endowed scholarship to the university said, "I believe in life that first you learn, then you earn, then you return. It is important to build bridges so that others can come after you."

Now he and his wife wanted to build bridges, and that is why they wanted to establish a scholarship in honor of his mother and father, a front-desk manager of a hotel, and a dean. Then he made an interesting statement. He said, "I've always believed what the Bible said: 'To whom much has been given, much will be required.'" (Luke 12:48)

Mostly when we refer to this statement, we're thinking about money. If someone has made a lot of money then he or she should give a lot of money. And I do believe that, but I don't believe that wisdom is solely limited to that understanding.

What had the disciples received from Jesus? They certainly didn't receive money. Instead, they had the opportunity to see amazing things, they had experienced his unconditional love, and they were forgiven and blessed. They had seen the risen Christ. They had been given much and now they had something to share.

In Acts, we heard about how after the resurrection Peter and John had gone up to the temple to pray. When they came to the temple there was a beggar asking for alms. They went and stood in front of him and Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." (Acts 3:6)

The doctor and his wife said that they had been blessed. He had made a lot of money and so he felt he needed to share that money to build bridges to help other kids get the same opportunity that he had. Yes — good for them.

But I also think that all of us, individually and collectively as a church, have something important to offer. The disciples were given a message — a message about God's love and about God's amazing grace. It was a message that gave a lame beggar hope in the future and power for the present. It was a message that empowered him to get up and walk. It gave him a new beginning.

The disciples shared the power of that message because they were blessed by the grace of Christ. They built bridges so that others could come after them. The folk who gathered here in 1826 with the Reverend John Todd and built this building built a bridge for us.

Now it is our turn and our responsibility to keep building those bridges for others. We have received the message that gives us hope in the future and a power in the present, and to whom much has been given, much is required.

We may be small — 100 or so families, \$300K budget, 9,000 sq. feet, ½ acre — but God can do big things in us and with us and through us. We simply need to start where we are and be faithful with what we've been given.

But we cannot be content with where we are such that we say “enough”... God did not create us as individuals, nor gather us as a church to live a life of mediocrity and good enough.

We cannot say, “My kids did fine with Sunday School in the old Parish House....”  
We cannot accept that it's okay for folks to struggle up the stairs Sunday after Sunday. Just because we have gotten used to the torn and worn upholstery in the Parlor doesn't make it okay.

“We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (Hebrews 6:12)

What we do here is important because it serves those who are not here yet.  
What will the next generation in our church inherit from us?

Christ is the foundation.  
Learning is the structure.  
Sharing is the windows.  
Faith is the key.

Amen.