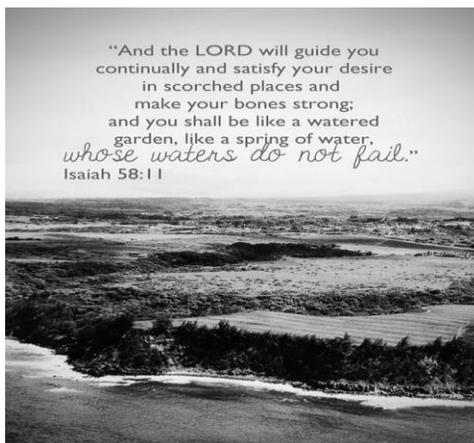


BUILDING GARDENS, BEARING FRUIT



Scripture:

Isaiah 58:6-11

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

2nd Corinthians 9:12-15 (New International Version)

¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



BUILDING GARDENS, BEARING FRUIT

I wrote this sermon and chose these passages with the people who serve on our Synod of the Pacific in mind. But I think this message from God is meant for me to share with you all as well. I was at our Synod meeting in Reno last week. The moderator asked me to preach at the worship service on Thursday.

SYNOD OF THE PACIFIC MEETING

I am one of two representatives from the Presbytery of the Redwoods to our Synod of the Pacific

I am on the Personnel Committee of our Synod which is made up of eleven Presbyteries which have twenty to fifty congregations in each Presbytery. We are bordered by the Synod of the Rockies to the east, Synod of the Northwest and Alaska to the North, and the Synod of Southern California to the

South, and a corner of the Synod of the Sun touches ours. We have Presbyteries in our Synod from Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, and Northern California.

So it is an interesting bunch when we meet together. There are many outdoorsy types who are very dedicated to the church. Our Personnel Committee oversees the policies affecting staff in our Synod, Presbyteries, and churches. We also look at staffing and the way our Synod budget is compensating the staff. Our Presbytery executives are considered Synod staff, too. Bob Conover is the executive for our Presbytery of the Redwoods.

At the regular plenary session we vote on the overall budget for the synod, hear reports from all the committees including a Visioning Task Force that is looking at the potential for a merger of our Synod with the Synod of the Rockies. But this won't be voted on until the next meeting or two. We have just two meetings a year, so things move pretty slowly at Synod.

They hold these meetings in locations where the majority can get there. One person drove nine hours from Oregon, so my four and a half hour drive didn't seem so bad. Many people flew in to the meeting at the Grand Sierra Resort in Reno. It was kind of a sleazy casino, and it seemed really odd to me to have a meeting there. Then when it was time to prepare for the worship service... Let me set the scene. When I arrived in the meeting room, the staff told me I would be preaching in the Wedding Chapel in the casino where they perform many weddings each week. So I asked to see it. It was a very bright white austere decorated room surrounded by big glass windows and doors so you could see in from all sides, like a big glass box with huge chandeliers on the ceiling a white grand piano, white leather pews, and white padded walls. There was no cross, no pulpit, no table. So we asked for a table to be brought in for the communion part of the service.

IF WALLS COULD TALK

We all pondered for a moment at the beginning of the service what stories the walls might tell us if they could speak. And I wondered if they had a chaplain on staff at the huge Grand Sierra Resort and Casino. I don't believe there was one but it could be beneficial for such places to have a chaplain or a minister of some kind. The chaplain could minister to people who were distraught over losing in gambling and possibly suicidal, or those

who need prayer and a sense of hope for the future. Maybe a chaplain would help the people who make bad decisions when they get drunk in the casino and impulsively get married? My brother could have used a chaplain's advice the morning he woke up to find a stranger beside him in Las Vegas.

My brother was truly shocked and had no idea he had married this stranger the night before. So he jumped up and went back home to our small town in Iowa. I was about twelve years old at the time and I was in my Mom's beauty salon after school when this gorgeous platinum blonde walked in one day asking for my brother, Jerry. My Mom had no idea my brother had married someone in Las Vegas when he visited there a couple weeks before. So we were all shocked to hear of their Las Vegas wedding from this nice young woman whose name was Sandy. I was fascinated at all this when I was young! I thought she was gorgeous, maybe a show girl or something?? So, after a private conversation with my brother, Sandy left town. All I was told was that their marriage was annulled.

I wonder if the chaplain who married them had offered to counsel them if my brother might have sought some advice rather than just run home; it could have saved Sandy the trip to Iowa. I don't know. But of all places, casinos seem to be in special need of some form of ministry. But let's go back to our scriptures.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS

I chose the 2nd Corinthians scripture because it is one of my favorites for thanking volunteers who work in the church, and to affirm the grace of God which is foundational to our work building up the kingdom of God.

But knowing how weary the Synod commissioners were after a long day of meetings and also being aware that some were coming from churches that were declining, I decided to focus on the Isaiah passage.

I believe Isaiah 58 contains the guidance and reassurance the church as a whole needs right now.

After Easter it might seem weird to talk about fasting. But this passage in Isaiah points out the type of fasting that is the most meaningful to God.

Not the type where we can make a big show of how hungry we are, or how much we miss chocolate.

No, the meaningful fast is one that looses the bonds of injustice, gives the homeless shelter, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and basically advocates for the oppressed wherever and whenever possible.

THE UNKNOWN

We were there at the Synod meeting knowing the Synod is changing and merging in a few years but not knowing how. The unknown is before us. What will the Synod of the Pacific look like in the year 2050? Will the church still exist?

I do believe the church is eternal, but it will look very different in 2050. So for now, I encouraged them to get serious about planning for the next five, ten, and fifteen years up to 2030. It is imperative to pray and faithfully plan if the church is going to survive.

In today's scripture passages, God offers the formula for ministry that has proven effective over the centuries. These passages in the Bible, and others, like Micah 6:8, still give us vital guidance, pathways and objectives that keep our ministries on track with God's plan.

This formula can also be used to assess how well our churches are preaching and teaching the Good News, caring for the poor, healing the sick, and advocating for the oppressed.

**Doing justice, loving kindness,
and walking humbly and peaceably
with God are our core values.
But how each church in the Synod
demonstrates these values must be
uniquely their own, based on the
community where they serve.**

MINISTRIES MUST ADAPT

Sounds so simple doesn't it? Yet, our beloved Presbyterian Church USA struggles to be relevant in a society that multi-tasks, communicates with social media, blogs, and is fiercely independent. So I looked up the definition of relevant to see what we were striving to be. Relevant means: having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matters at hand. The major way our PCUSA denomination

can stay relevant is by showing Christ's love in action.

In a multi-faceted ever changing society our ministries must adapt to meet the spiritual and physical needs of people in and outside the church. Being faithful to Christ's gospel message includes being willing to go where we have never gone before and reaching out beyond our comfort zones, like to a casino in Reno. Jesus demonstrated his compassionate ministry of love through generously offering forgiveness and healing. What better place to offer healing, forgiveness, and hope than in a casino.

Ponder in your minds for a moment how Jesus would respond to the people habitually gambling their paychecks away. Many of the faces glued to the fancy machines looked so hopeless, as if they were in bondage to the machines. I saw one man that was smoking, drinking, repeatedly pulling the lever, and looking desperately sad all at the same time. What kind of ministry reaches those who only find hope in a casino?

A NEW MINISTRY

I have a pastor friend who creatively thought up a new ministry while traveling across the country one summer. She noticed the faces of many truck drivers looked gloomy in the truck stop cafes. So she started a Truck Stop Ministry on the Pennsylvania turnpike. She holds Sunday evening services and afterwards she provides counseling for the truckers who are stressed and lonesome. My friend has turned that bleak truck stop into what Isaiah would call a Spring of Water.

One of the reasons our Church of the Roses is building a community garden is to show our surrounding neighborhood what Christ's love looks like in action. We hope the neighbors might join us in digging, planting, harvesting and giving away our vegetables and fruits to the hungry. We will also offer some of our harvest to the Boys and Girls Club across the street.

Church of the Roses is producing good fruit literally, as we grow our church at the same time. By the end of May, we will have gained close to thirty new members in the past eighteen months. This is the fruit that grows when a church congregation decides to do more community outreach. People are hungry and thirsty for ways to serve, to give their lives meaning and purpose. We

can satisfy that hunger with creative opportunities to serve God inside and outside our church.

PEOPLE ARE SEARCHING

All humans need ‘five c’s’: community, care, connection and a common cause. People are often looking for a meaningful project to join. So we are trying to reach farther into the community and invite people through MeetUp online to join us for volunteer opportunities such as our garden development and serving the high school breakfast in the mornings.

When we were handing out the fliers inviting our neighbors to the Neighborhood Watch program, we heard a home behind our church was robbed a few months ago. That news inspired about twenty-five neighbors to attend our organizational meeting. None of them are members yet, but all are very grateful for the education they received that night.

GOD’S SPRING OF WATER

Isaiah 58 explains the benefits that are reaped by doing all of these things: “And if you give yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places (like Santa Rosa) and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”

When we pour ourselves out for others, God promises to make us like a watered garden; we will receive the water we need for refreshment. But even more, we will be a spring of water that enables us to carry on in the demanding, sometimes exhausting ministry of self-giving. This is a pattern of divine life, the kind of fasting that the Lord appreciates.

God calls us to risk our lives for the mission of the church and to trust that God’s spring of water will never fail if we are faithfully doing our part to keep the garden growing even far beyond our back yard.

Last year our church built an aquaponic garden at an orphanage in Haiti. The children now have fish and vegetables to enhance their beans and rice diet. But the joy we received from making friends with those kids is priceless. I invited the Synod commissioners to join us this year in our building of a chicken coop at the same orphanage in Haiti. One commissioner came up with an idea to help. He

suggested that we take some egg cartons for collecting the eggs that the hens will lay.

According to Isaiah, the odds are in our favor. The spring of water will never fail if we do ministry in the parched places, like Haiti, casinos, wedding chapels, and truck stops. We are being called to go where the darkness exists so Christ’s light can rise and shine in the darkness.

With God’s grace and blessing, let’s go!

Benediction:

Trust that when you grow weary in ministry here or wherever you serve, the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen

Happy Mother’s Day!



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