**Living Church: Presence**

**Colossians 3:14-17**

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 “Miss Crump,” Crump was my maiden name, “Miss Crump, you cannot have gradations of unique. If something is unique, it is unique. It cannot be very unique or somewhat unique or really unique. It is either unique, meaning like nothing else, or it is not.”

 There are certain lessons we learn in high school that we never forget. This is one for me and it came from a short, frightening, powerhouse of an English teacher named Mrs. Sharp. Mrs. Sharp taught expository writing and grammar among other things. Her class was not fun. She was demanding and a perfectionist. But, I’ll tell you what, I learned grammar - I mean I really learned grammar - from her. It is because of Mrs. Sharp that I know about relative clauses and prepositional phrases and, yes, the unique nature of the word unique.

 I shudder to think what Mrs. Sharp would think of your bulletin cover this week. Do you see what the problem is? Yes, church is not really a verb. But, as Adele and I worked on a bulletin design for this sermon series, this idea of church as active captured what I want to explore with you this summer. You see, I believe with all my heart that the church has a pivotal role to play in the world right now. That we have the chance to counter a lot of the trends toward consumerism, antagonism, conflict and aggression that characterize much of secular society right now. We have something really valuable to offer. But, to do that, we have to do more than just show up at church – we have to be church. Do church. Live church.

 The church as it first emerged from the ragtag group of disciples who followed along with Jesus in his ministry was never meant to be passive. It was not meant to be something we consume. Rather, it was an active, transformative, living community that grew like wildfire because it offered an alternative way of relating to God and to others – a way constructed around love rather than hate, forgiveness rather than judgment, justice rather than oppression, hope rather than despair.

 All these centuries later, we are called to the same active, engaged, loving way of life. How do we do it? Actually, our church membership vows create a pretty good structure for us. Whenever we welcome new members or we baptize someone, we promise to support that person in their faith journey and to support the church with our presence, gifts, service, prayers and witness. Presence, gifts, service, prayers and witness. How do we live church? How do we make church active – a verb rather than a noun? Whether you are a member or not, those five things are a great place to start.

 So, for five weeks this summer, we’re going to look at each of those. And you will not only hear from me. Each week, a member of our congregation is going to share with you how they live church. I’m also going to use these sermons as a way to introduce some new opportunities in the life of our church that we hope will help you to make church a verb!

 So, we start today with presence. As you may have already heard, worship attendance in mainline Protestant churches across the country and across denominations has been on a steady decline for many years. There are a lot of reasons why – people want to sleep in on Sunday, kids have sporting events. We all have so many other options of things to do on the weekend. So, in the midst of this massive change, does it really matter if you are present in church? And what do we really mean by “presence.”

 You might guess that I have a little bit of a bias about this. So let’s start with something more objective. We know from recent research that attending church regularly actually has physical and psychological benefits. People who go to church weekly smoke less, take better care of themselves, and actually live longer. They also report less depression, have stronger support networks, and experience a deeper sense of gratitude.

 Church matters. Worship provides a place where we can learn to open ourselves to God’s work in our lives. Through music, prayer, sermons, and sacraments, we learn to know God, to be grateful for all that God has given us, and to find meaning in our lives.

 But, here’s the thing. Your presence isn’t just important for you but for others as well. Last week, Emily and I spent some time sitting on the shores of Lake Superior hunting for rocks and skipping stones. If you’ve spent any time on the Superior shore, you know that most of the rocks are very smooth and rounded. At one point, Em made the observation that it’s not just the waves that make them that way – it’s how they knock up against each other. The waves send them tumbling and they are shaped and smoothed as they bump up against each other and the shoreline.

 The same is true of our spiritual formation and growth. We are shaped by the powerful movement of God in our lives but also by how we bump up against each other. Being a Christ-follower has never been, and still isn’t, something you can do in isolation. As Richard Rohr puts it, “God can only be loved and known in the act of love. God can only be experienced in communion.” To be present doesn’t only mean to be present in the church building or even to be present to God in prayer and worship. It also means to be present to each other. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught the early Methodists to “watch over one another in love.”

 We are a community, a family, and that means that we help to form, to challenge, to shape, to comfort, to inspire, to serve each other. We are the church to each other. We are the face of God to each other. And to do that, we have to be – well, with each other. To be present in each other’s lives – through the joys, the doubts, the triumphs, the crises.

 In a church the size of this one, that isn’t easy. Even if you show up every week for worship, that doesn’t mean that you have found people with whom you connect, people you would ask for help, people you would feel comfortable offering help to. To do that, you’ve got to find your church within the church. That may be a Disciple class, a group of Sunday school teachers, a fellowship group, the choir.

 Or, it may be your brand new Neighborhood Care Group. During the last few months, a team of our church staff people has been working on placing every household in our church family in a group with their nearest FUMC neighbors. The groups each have somewhere between eight and fifteen households in them. Some are made up of households on just a couple of neighborhood streets; others are much more spread out. In the next week or so, you should be receiving a mailing that tells you who is in your group. If you don’t, please let us know.

 There are at least three things we hope these groups will do. One is to provide a sense of connection to some of your neighbors. I suspect many of us have neighbors who go to this church and we don’t even know it. So, we hope that the groups will gather for some sort of social event – a barbeque, a picnic, a potluck – a couple of times each year. Secondly, we hope that the groups can offer care and support to each other. When a neighbor needs a ride or a meal or someone to feed their cat, they know people from church that they can feel comfortable asking for help. Finally, we hope these groups will follow up with visitors who come to church from their neighborhood.

 Your Neighborhood Care Group may decide to do other things, as well. You may choose to do a study together or meet regularly to talk about questions of faith. The minimum commitment we’re asking is that you meet socially, take care of each other, and welcome newcomers.

 Many of the groups already have coordinators – someone to help the group get started and to be a contact person for the church staff. However, we’re still looking for coordinators for some of the groups, too. If that is something you would be willing to do, please shoot me an email and ask about it.

 Or, you can ask the person I’m about to introduce to you. The Neighborhood Care Group Project would not have gotten off the ground without the help of Shonagh Chimbira. Shonagh has been a seminary intern here at the church since January. You may have heard her name or seen her face or the faces of her children, Mikey, Saffy, and Charly. Shonagh is a member of our church as well as a student, about to enter her last year, at Ashland Theological Seminary. I’ve asked Shonagh to share a little bit with you about why she values presence as part of living church.

 I came of age about the same time as the internet and so I'm one of those people that do everything on their phone. A couple of years ago I started doing church online. I would find a church from anywhere in the world and be a virtual congregant from the comfort of my sofa, or outside lying on the grass watching clouds drift by, or anywhere else that I felt like being. I thought I could have the best of all worlds. I even listened to sermons from this church for a while before I actually physically visited. It was, and still is something I really enjoy doing, but of course even this super-strong introvert knew back then something that very important was missing. Can you guess what? People!

 The way I see people is that each of us is created in the image and likeness of God, and yet we're all so very different. And I see this as a good thing because to be in the presence of someone who is very different to me is an opportunity to experience another expression of God. Put us all together and it's like a pixilated image coming into focus that reveals the great beauty of God. All you artists and art lovers know that it's the contrasts, the different shades, colors and brush strokes that give an image shape, depth and quality. Each one of us here has a different personality, appearance, life story, and energy or spirit. So it's a real gift to walk into a gathering of people who are different, and yet also held together as one by a strong common bond. Church is the only place I can think of where you can walk in and have total strangers smile, shake your hand warmly, and say “welcome” (without being paid to do it because it's their job), and then there's also the free food. But most importantly it's a place where you can belong simply because you were divinely created and are present.

 As an immigrant, the most powerful demonstration of welcome, acceptance, and support I have ever experienced in this community was from the church vote to become a solidarity congregation. In a world that is filled with hatred, oppression and persecution, you all offered your presence as sanctuary to those feeling the pain and living in fear and for me that was a tangible experience of the presence of God. There’s a Southern African philosophy that believes that a person is an only person because of other people. Kind of like the question “if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it does it make a sound?” I've always thought “well no” because the culture I was raised in believes that we need each other to be seen and heard.

We need our presence to be acknowledged in order to exist. And those who are marginalized, demonized and ignored by society have a much greater need. Ostracism and isolation are the worst forms of punishment- just think of solitary confinement. So there's no greater gift than to offer your presence to someone who really needs it.

 As we all gather together and worship as children of God there is that energy, the power of the Holy Spirit that if we let our guards down, can diffuse all the toxic barriers that our society has constructed and allow us to look beyond what divides us to what heals and unites us. When we pray together we enter into each other's sufferings as well as celebrations and powerfully raise each other up. When we unite our many different voices in the unison prayers we have the ability to change the world in ways that we may never be able to see nor understand. You can't do any of *this* online.

 Keeping it real though, I know that church and its people are not perfect, and neither am I. That’s because we are all moving towards that Wesleyan perfection that Doug spoke about last week. We are all human. But I come to church prepared to look beyond our humanness to our divinity and to see, experience and participate in God, and I do. Thank you all.

 Thank you, Shonagh. As we seek to actively live out what the church was meant to be, may we find how we might be present – in our lives, with our God, and to each other. Amen.