**Living Church: Witness**

**Isaiah 58:6-7**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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As some of you know, I grew up in a Methodist household. My parents were both active in their Methodist churches when they were young. They met and married at the Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois. My father taught at a United Methodist-affiliated college. We went to church every week. I was in children’s choir and United Methodist Youth Fellowship. Even into my young adulthood, I attended a United Methodist Church.

And then, like a lot of people, I wandered away. My husband and I moved to Switzerland and lived there for six years. It was hard to get motivated to travel into Zurich on Sunday morning to attend the one English-speaking Protestant church in the area. Plus, I became curious about other spiritual traditions. I did some studying of Zen Buddhism and sought out my spiritual nourishment in music and nature.

And then, like a lot of people, I had a baby. There’s nothing like being responsible for the moral and spiritual upbringing of a tiny new life to bring a person quickly back to the faith. To be honest, though, I didn’t immediately return to the United Methodist Church. We did a fair bit of church-shopping – visiting a Lutheran Church, the Unitarian Church, and a congregational church. What brought me home to Methodism, at least initially, were the people. Three people in particular.

Two of the three were women who were moms in Emily’s co-op preschool. They were so kind, so active in their children’s lives, so compassionate and joy-filled and service-oriented. And their kids were, too. I wanted what they had – for me and for Emily. It turned out they both went to the local United Methodist Church and invited us to visit. At that church, I heard a pastor preach who inspired me but also made me feel safe. She made room for me to doubt and question my faith, she used non-gendered language for God, she believed emphatically in the importance of social justice as part of faith.

If it were not for those three women, I doubt very much I would be your pastor today. They invited me into their church community and they made a place for me to feel connected and to grow. Who are those people in your life? Who invited you to this church or made you feel comfortable here? Who listened to your questions and your doubts? Who helped you in your journey to a faith you could invest in?

This sermon is the last in a series I started earlier this summer called *Living Church.* My premise is that we are living in a time when our society desperately needs what church has to offer. This Labor Day weekend, when we reflect on the contributions of all kinds of workers, is a great time to reflect on our work as followers of Jesus. Our job is to “live church”- to be what Jesus taught us to be in the world and, thereby, offer an alternative to the ugliness and hostility that seem so prevalent today. I’ve built the series around the five ways we promise to support the church when we become members – through our presence, gifts, service, prayers and, today, witness.

That word “witness”, at least in the context of religion, makes a lot of us a little bit nervous. It was added to the United Methodist membership vows at the General Conference of 2008, but not without some controversy. For many of us, “witness” conjures up images of someone knocking at the door of your home on a Saturday afternoon and entrapping you in a conversation about God and salvation that you really don’t want to have. Or, of televangelists who define faithfulness as pledging money to support the preacher’s extravagant lifestyle. Or, of a 21st century John the Baptist standing on a city street corner preaching damnation to whomever walks by.

If one of those places is where you mind went as soon as you learned the topic of this sermon, let me gently bring you back. Because I don’t think that any of that is what Jesus means when he says to the disciples, “You are the light of the world…let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Rather, I think witness has everything to do with how we live our faith in the world. And, therefore, it is, perhaps, the most powerful means we have of creating change in the world, of offering the world an alternative path – the path of love. In writing about this passage, John Wesley said, “the very design of God in giving you this light was that it might shine. That is, that in seeing your good works, others may be moved to love and serve God likewise”.

How we live our lives is the most meaningful way we have to show what it means to follow Jesus, to live by his teaching. What does that look like? A lot like what we heard in the passage from Isaiah – “to loose the bonds of injustice…to let the oppressed go free… to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house”. Or, in Jesus’ own words, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me…Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Our witness to the world is how we behave and how we speak. When we stand up to racism, when we serve meals at Alpha House, when we offer the church portico as a safe place for homeless folks to sleep, when we open our doors to all God’s children, when we teach our children the intrinsic value of every human life, when we offer love, healing and reconciliation in the face of prejudice and hatred. All of this and so much more is what we have to offer as a witness of our faith to the world.

The only thing is that the world can only be changed by our witness if the world knows about what we’re doing. In other words, we have to share our stories. So many of us compartmentalize our faith from the rest of our lives. Many of us will go to work this week and never say a word about what we did at church over the weekend. Yet, just like those preschool moms did for me, we can inspire others when we say, “We took the kids to make sandwiches for the homeless at church Friday night” or “Our church just had a meeting to discuss immigration and what role the church can play.”

So, our witness extends one step beyond living church, living our faith, to sharing with others what we’re doing. Not by hitting them over the head with self-serving theology or fear of damnation but by simply connecting how we live to this place and to the journey of faith. And then inviting others to join us on the journey.

We live in a society where talking about religion is almost verboten, and yet, we all know people who are searching for meaning, looking for opportunities to serve, or in need of community, support, and love. Who do you know who might find what they are looking for here at FUMC?

Next week is the kick off of our program year. We’ll go back to two services, Doug will start a new sermon series, our Sunday’s Cool Disciples and our youth programs will start up again. Choir rehearsals will begin. We’ll soon be hearing about more opportunities for mission and outreach. It’s a great time to invite someone to church. As you came in, you should have received a little business card that you can use to invite a friend to join us here. On the front are our service times. On the back is a place where you can make plans for a friend’s visit. Take it with you. Stick it in your wallet – pull it out when you hear someone say they’d like their kids to learn about service or their baby to be baptized. Hand it to a friend who is grieving or a co-worker who just moved to town.

A couple of years ago, Hal and Laurie Brannan did just this – they invited their friends, Dawn and Saroya Cicero, to our church. I’ve asked them to tell you a little bit about their experience of witness.

[Laurie] I want to share a little about what “witnessing” has looked like for me and Hal and how we came to be standing up here with Saroya and Dawn. First I would like to tell you a story about how someone witnessed to me about twenty years ago, and the impact that had on my family. Hal and I and our three young children had just moved to North Carolina and I was very homesick. Sometime in our first month there, I took my kids to a neighborhood playground where there were some other women with their children. One of the women struck up a conversation with me, and after I told her I was new in the area, she asked me if I had found a church yet. I was a little taken aback by this question, since it was coming from someone I had just met at a playground-- but I could tell she was sincere. I think I mentioned to her that Hal and I were Catholic and that we were looking for a Catholic church, but in spite of that, this woman invited us to visit her church, which was a Methodist Church. We eventually did visit her church, and found out that the woman I had met at the playground was actually married to one of the pastors. She didn’t mention that at the playground that day; she never gave me the hard sell about her church; I think she just saw someone who needed to feel connected and so she shared with me something that was important in her life. Hal and I ended up joining that Methodist Church and I’ll always be grateful to her for inviting us.

Fast forward to two years ago when Hal and I were visiting Dawn and Saroya and their three wonderful children—Ben, Jackson, and Charlotte. I remember Saroya mentioned to me that she and Dawn wanted to have their children baptized and were looking for a church to be a part of. I said to them something like—“you might want to give our church a try. We have great pastors, lots of great programs for kids, it is a very welcoming community.” And at the time, I was working in the nursery, so I was thrilled at the idea of helping to take care of their kids. I **LOVE** our church and I thought that Dawn and Saroya would love it, too. I think that any “witnessing” we were doing that day was simply a desire to share with them something that was important in our lives. ­­­

When I was talking to Dawn and Saroya about this a couple of weeks ago, I wanted to make sure I told this story accurately. I was feeling like maybe we really didn’t have much to do with them joining our church. Dawn told me that FUMC was one of the churches they were considering anyway. But she also said that we gave them the nudge that they needed to take the next step toward visiting our church.

I’m grateful that someone invited me to her church twenty years ago and SO glad that Hal and I were given the opportunity to nudge Dawn and Saroya toward our church.

[Saroya] Yes, Dawn is here - she is downstairs with our triplet two and a half year olds. I think she said it best when she said FUMC is “the extended family we never knew we needed.” We had driven by the church numerous times and always noticed the rainbow flag. Yet each time we discussed attending we thought “Mmm, yeah, are they really truly welcoming? Or will they just tolerate us enough?” We both had experiences like that in the past. It wasn’t until I met Laurie at work when our own perceptions began to change. Laurie spoke so glowingly of the church. You could feel the love she held. So many students at the U would come by her office just to chat - it was easy to see what a special person she is. If Laurie could be a witness of generosity and time to those students even when she was super busy, then she couldn’t be wrong about the atmosphere within FUMC. So after our kids were born we knew it was time to listen to our hearts and to attend church. FUMC has become a place of solace, refuge, and friendship. We see our children thriving within this community, especially while attending Carol Fast’s two-year-old class -- they absolutely adore her. Earlier this year, all three were in the hospital and the church responded. From prayers and visits from Carol and Amy Kennedy, our church was there. When my wife needed extra hands at home to care for our very active toddlers, the church was there. Pastor Nancy took time out to connect us with women who were willing to lend those hands. Carol Spaly and Jan Radak, we thank you for your time and love, and for widening the social circle for our kids while sharing special Monday mornings with them. So to truly witness to all of you what FUMC means to us, has given us, and, more importantly, what God has blessed us with, you can simply look at the smiles on our children’s faces to understand the depth of compassion and caring the church has gifted their mothers. Thank you.

[Rev. Nancy] Thanks to all four of you. I started this sermon series with the crazy idea that church is as much a verb as it is a noun. Church is something we do. Our labor as Jesus’ followers is to actively live our faith. When we do, when we live the compassion, inclusion, and love that Jesus taught, people notice that light. They want the light that we’ve got. Our calling, our commission, is to invite them to join us on our journey so that together we can embody the kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.