**Building a Bigger Table: A Church Without Walls**

**Luke 10:1-11**

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When you walk into our church buildings these days, in some ways, it feels as though the church is frozen in time. Downtown, the monitor just inside the west entry still reads “All Church Activities are cancelled through March 29”.  The three blackboards where people write their prayer concerns and celebrations still say things like pray for the virus in China and the wildfires in Australia. In both of our church homes, there is evidence that the weekend of March 14 and 15, we worshiped as usual in our two sanctuaries, but the next weekend we did not - and we haven’t since.

 If I remember correctly, I made the decision to close the buildings - with input from our church leaders - on Thursday, March 19.  On Friday, I drove down to Richmond, Indiana to pick up my college kid since Earlham College was closing, as well.  And then on Saturday, a few of us gathered in the downtown sanctuary without any idea what we were doing and created our first online worship service.

As so often happens, necessity became the mother of invention that day.  And we have been inventing ever since.  We’ve gone from almost no online presence to two weekly worship services, several online adult faith formation classes, an online youth group and children’s small groups.  Our musicians have learned how to create music online, and our staff and administrative committees have continued to care for the church while meeting online.  So, while on the one hand, seeing the church buildings empty can feel depressing - and I know we deeply miss being together in our church homes - I also think we’ve learned something - something that I find really exciting. We’ve learned that we can be church in new and different ways and meet and serve new and different people.  We’ve learned that we can be a church without walls.

 This is the second in our stewardship sermon series entitled, “Building A Bigger Table”, in which we are exploring how we, like Jesus, can practice radical hospitality to reach people we haven’t known before.  Since I believe that one way we get through challenging times is by imagining a different future, I am using these sermons to help us all, the congregation of First United Methodist Church, think about what church might look like in the coming months and years.  Specifically, how we can both reclaim our sanctuaries after Covid and expand our reach in service and worship and witness - bringing the love of God to more people outside our church walls. How might we build a bigger table?

  Now, you might understandably be wondering why I am thinking about growing our ministries when it feels as though so much is on hold and uncertain.  So, let me share a few thoughts about that.  First of all, we really don’t know what our country is going to look like over the next few years.  The election may be over, but the deep divisions between Americans are still there and the wounds are far from healed.  The systemic racism which we are just beginning to talk about is still deeply entrenched in how our society functions.  Covid-19 is still surging all over the country.  So many among us feel frightened, uncertain, and isolated.  If ever people needed the gospel of hope, it is now, and we have so much hope to offer at FUMC.

In addition to the gospel, people need the help our church community can offer.  We still have no idea what all of the economic fallout of Covid-19 will be or how long it will last, but regardless, there are people without homes, without food, without resources right here in Ann Arbor and around the world.  We already have great mission and outreach programs, but I suspect we’ll need to expand them - as we have with the Covid relief fund - as people continue to seek stability during this difficult time.

Finally, Covid has forced us to change, and we can build on the changes we’ve made. Online church has opened up so many possibilities. How many times in the last months have I heard people say, “I like going to church in my pajamas” or “It’s great to have church whenever I can fit it in”. In fact, in a recent study, the Barna group found that while 71% of baby boomers are looking forward to returning to in person worship, only 41% of Gen Z, 42% of Millennials, and 47% of Gen X’ers say they will return to in person worship.  When all the generations are combined, the percentage of people who say they will return to in person worship is only about 60%.  Therefore, 40% of all people currently attending worship do not plan to return to worship in the sanctuary.

 So, there are a lot of good reasons for us to look at how we might extend our table outside our existing church walls to take the love of God and all that the church can be out to our community and out into the world.

 We are, of course, not the first Christ-followers to forge a new path or to be in ministry outside of a building.  In fact, the first buildings built specifically for Christian worship weren’t constructed until the second half of the third century.  So, for the first two centuries, the church went to the community rather than asking the community to come to the church.  This all started when Jesus first sent disciples out to towns and villages ahead of him.  In our scripture reading for today, Jesus is preparing seventy disciples he is about to send out in mission and service.  As we envision the future of First United Methodist Church, what can we learn from the instructions he gives them about taking church to the people?

 I think there are a few things that are relevant for us today as we think of our church in light of this scripture.  The first is that Jesus doesn’t send the seventy disciples out alone.  They go in pairs so everyone has someone to support and encourage them.  They also can brainstorm, think creatively, and problem-solve together.  When we think of all the needs in the world right now, we, like the disciples, can do so much more to meet those needs together than any one of us could alone.  What part might you play?

Before he sends them off, Jesus also tells the disciples, “Whatever house you enter, say ‘Peace to this house!’.  How profound that the very first words, the very first action as we extend our table to others is to speak of peace.  Theologian Amy Oden writes, “Notice that Jesus does not tell them to do any sort of assessment before making this proclamation. He doesn’t ask them to determine whether this house follows the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or whether this house has kept the law or whether this house is likely to receive the good news Jesus brings.”  In other words, we are to offer peace to everyone we encounter regardless of their economic status, race, gender, ethnicity, differing abilities, or political affiliation.

In this post-election time in the United States when tensions are still high and our divisions seem to define us, this instruction from Jesus that we enter into conversation and ministry with a word of peace is especially important.  There is so much we don’t know about the future, but we do know that offering the peace of God - the peace which passes all understanding - can be a first step in healing where relationships are broken or a first invitation into a new relationship.

A third observation from Jesus’ instructions to his disciples is that he tells them to say to everyone they meet, whether that person welcomes or rejects them, “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.”

That is perhaps the most important task for us as we look to the future - to building a bigger table.  God has a vision for humanity that Jesus calls the Kingdom of God.  He modeled for us through his words and behaviors what the kingdom looks like -  a life-changing community bonded by love, open to all, fair and just, compassionate and kind.

We have the opportunity - dare I say “responsibility” -to model that community for others and invite them to join us in whatever way they can.  The Kingdom of God is a different way to be in community, and our country needs that now. We are stuck thinking in black and white.  There is the conservative way or the liberal way, the Republican way or the Democratic way.  We at FUMC can offer the Jesus way, the way of love, the way of hope.

As we put to practice these instructions from Jesus about extending his teachings into the world, I’m not exactly sure what our bigger table is going to look like.  I feel confident that it will, from now on, include a community of people within our congregation that worships, studies, and even serves online.  I believe we will continue to build our online presence and digital ministries so we can meet and engage people where they are spiritually no matter where they live physically - here in Ann Arbor or in some other city, state, or country.  In addition, I hope that, as the pandemic recedes, our table will extend out in service in some new ways in Washtenaw County and beyond. Just as importantly, I hope that more of us will find ways to be in service as serving others is key to growing in faith. I pray that we will purposefully try to reach people who are not yet at our table so that we become a more diverse, and therefore more welcoming, church community.  And I would like to see us have new families join us because I believe our children’s and youth ministries help parents raise moral kids who embody the kingdom.  So, those are some of my dreams of how we might extend our table.  What are yours?  And how might you participate?

Someday, we will once again meet in our beautiful sanctuaries.  The monitor in the west entry downtown will have a whole deck of slides announcing upcoming activities.  The special music roster here at Green Wood will be filled with the names of visiting musicians again.  We will be blown away by the music, touched by the scripture, delighted by the children, inspired by being in community.

Yet, we will not be the same church we were before March 19.  We’ve learned how creative and innovative we can be as we offer peace and the promise of God’s kingdom to our community and world.  I am inspired by all the possibilities as we reach beyond our walls and I am so excited to see where we will go and who we will meet as we build our table ever bigger.

May it be so.  Amen.