

Cornerstones and Living Stones

1 Peter 2:4-6, 9-10

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

Sunday, May 7, 2023

1738

Sunday a.m., May 7, preached in St. Lawrence's, was asked not to come back anymore.

Sunday p.m., May 7, preached at St. Katherine Cree's church, deacons said, "Get out and stay out."

Sunday a.m., May 14, preached at St. Ann's, can't go back there either.

Sunday afternoon, May 21, preached at St. John's, kicked out again.

Sunday evening, May 21, preached at St. somebody else's, Bennet's maybe, deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

1739

Tuesday, May 8, afternoon service, preached in a pasture in Bath, 1,000 people came to hear me.

Sunday, September 9, preached to 10,000 people three weeks in a row in Moorfields.

1742,

Friday, March 10, preached in meadow, chased out of meadow as a bull was turned loose during the services.

What you just heard are excerpts from the journals of John Wesley, the Anglican priest who began the Methodist movement. I call it a movement because Wesley never intended to start a new denomination. He loved the Church of England, but he was disturbed that the church had become quite exclusive, only welcoming those of the upper classes and neglecting the spiritual and physical needs of people like farmers, coal miners, day laborers, and others who often lived in poverty. As a student at Oxford, he and a group of friends had developed a "method" of faith formation they believed aligned with the teachings of Jesus. Their method included rigorous Bible study, worship, and prayer on the one hand, and service, such as visiting prisoners and teaching children, on the other.

Wesley began to preach about this method and the theology behind it in different area churches but, as you can tell, his message was not particularly well-received by the Anglican establishment. He was banned from pulpit after pulpit - even from his home church in Epworth, where he ended up preaching from on top of his father's grave. And so, despite his preference for the pulpit and the comfort of a church building, he began traveling to the people on the fringes of society. He preached in fields and coal mines, on hilltops and along village streets. He wanted all of God's people to hear the Good News. Somewhat by force and then by choice, Wesley left behind church buildings and traveled across England on horseback, declaring "the world is my parish". In starting the Methodist movement, he took the faith outside the four walls of the church and out into the world.

I've been reminded of Wesley so often as, over the last few months, we have been talking about how we can better use our buildings and properties to do God's kingdom work in our community. This weekend, we are embarking on a plan to adapt and change as a church to keep us relevant and vital in meeting the needs of a changing society. Sadly, part of that plan is a

recommendation that we sell property at our Green Wood location, which is what we will be voting on this weekend. So, as we reflect on both the bigger mission of our church and the specific question of whether to sell property at Green Wood, I thought it might be helpful to make use of a very Wesleyan approach - grounding ourselves in scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, which together make up what is known as the Wesley quadrilateral.

For us, scripture and tradition are closely entwined. Wesley found the courage and willingness to move out of church buildings and into the fields in the example of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, of course, never had a church building or a pulpit. He occasionally healed or taught in the synagogue, and he once turned over the tables of the moneychangers at the temple. But, truly, his was a traveling ministry as he walked from place to place with his disciples, stopping to teach on a hillside or a lakeshore, spending the night with friends, drinking from whatever well was nearby. In fact, one day a legal expert came up to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head".

Jesus understood that to change the world, he had to be out in the world. With his ministry, Jesus challenged the social order of his day. Where the Romans sought to overpower and dominate the people, Jesus stood up for them and empowered them. Where the religious officials considered those who were sick (plus a whole slew of other people) unclean, Jesus chose to heal them. In a society which functioned through the power of fear, Jesus introduced a society which thrived through the power of love. He introduced the Kingdom of God, creating a vision of how humanity could live in peace and abundance in a world where neighbor loved neighbor and each of God's children experienced mutual respect and dignity. To show people what that might look like, he went to them, meeting them where they were, and ultimately commissioning them to continue his work in building the kingdom.

So, what we can glean from both Jesus and John Wesley is that the kingdom work of the church happens out there rather than exclusively in here. That's not to say that buildings don't matter. In our Judeo-Christian heritage, there is a long tradition, going all the way back to Solomon building the first temple in Jerusalem, of creating beautiful structures where we can worship, learn, and grow together. Yet, much of the work of kingdom building happens out in the world.

There is a second gleaning we can take from the teachings of Jesus as we consider our church's future. According to Luke 17, "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." In other words, to quote a song, "the church is not the building, the church not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people"! We are the church; we are the kingdom of God!

In the letter he wrote to the new Christians in Asia Minor, Peter developed this theme using a metaphor of building a sanctuary. It isn't a literal building he is speaking of but rather a human community built on Jesus and his teachings as its cornerstone. Unlike the heavy, lifeless stones used to build the walls of a cathedral, Jesus is the living stone, the source of life for those of us who seek to work toward fulfillment of his kingdom. We who follow Jesus, who seek to

bring this world closer to God's vision for human community, are the building stones for that community.

Commentator William Loder writes, "The stone imagery invites us to see ourselves also as stones and then to see ourselves together as not a random pile of rocks or stones strewn across the landscape of interim territory, but as stones belonging to a structure built on Christ. It is a wonderful image of belonging. People together are sacred places and spaces, temples not made with hands. It defines the church not as the building in which we meet but as the building we have become. Our role is to be a space where people engage holiness and sense the presence of God."

In his letter, Peter goes on to say that we are chosen by God to be "God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him." In other words, like Jesus, we are called to go out into the world and share God's love by feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, accepting those who are different from ourselves, tearing the walls that divide us, doing the work of kingdom-building.

I'm going to spend less time on the other two elements of Wesley's quadrilateral - reason and experience - because I think we have discussed those more in our all-church meetings. Reason tells us that membership numbers in our church and nearly all churches are dropping, fewer people in the U.S. are interested in church, and we can't sustain two church campuses with fewer members and givers. Experience shows us that, as well. It's been several years now since we went from three pastors to two and three custodians to two. It's not surprising that Green Wood has at times felt neglected. Yet, more importantly, I think, experience shows us that we are a great church with a lot to offer. That's why we're all here. We have a wonderful community, and we have already made an impact in so many ways. We can continue to do this!

The journey we've begun isn't easy. I know that whatever decisions we make along the way will mean change, and that change means loss. The first loss may be Green Wood, and if so, we must care for those who grieve. And there will be other losses along the way. But change also creates space for growth and transformation, for being the church in this time and place. We are the living stones. It is in our DNA as Christians and as Methodists to meet the people where they are, to take risks, and to transform the world through love.

May it be so. Amen.