

## **Wells We Did Not Dig**

### **Deuteronomy 6:10-12**

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We're going to start out with a little game. Language, of course, is something we learn from our parents when we are very young, but it also evolves over time as new words and phrases come into use to describe our experiences and relationships. Two common sources for language have been the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. So, we are going to play, "The Bible or Shakespeare?" I am going to name some words and phrases and you tell me if they are biblical or Shakespearean.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" - Bible, Genesis 4:9

"Apple of my eye" - Bible, Deuteronomy 32:10

"Break the ice" - Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew

"By the skin of your teeth" - Bible, Job 19:20

"All that glitters is not gold" - Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice

"Neither rhyme nor reason" - Shakespeare, The Comedy of Errors

"Nothing new under the sun" - Ecclesiastes 1:9

"Brave New World" - Shakespeare, The Tempest

And last but not least, "Pass the Mantle" - Bible, 2 Kings 2. Does anyone know what the context of this one is? That's right, it comes from the point in Israel's history when the prophet Elijah takes off his mantle, the symbol of a prophet's work, and passes it on to Elisha, the prophet who will continue Elijah's ministry. Elijah served God as a prophet for decades and is one of the most important and memorable of the Hebrew prophets. As he was approaching the end of his life, God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor. Elisha then spent six years serving Elijah, helping him, and learning from him. As Elijah approached his death, he was carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot. His mantle fell to the ground, and Elisha picked it up, symbolizing that he would take on Elijah's prophetic work.

This story is at the heart of our new sermon series and this year's annual giving campaign entitled, "Pick It Up. Pass It On." Just as Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and the work it represented, we have inherited the work of thousands of past members of First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. We benefit today from their faithfulness in stewarding this church, its resources, and its ministries. Now, it is time for us to pick up their work. To carry on what they started as we consider what needs to be done in our church, community, and world, do our part, and then pass on the mantle to the next generations.

So, what exactly have we inherited from those who have loved this church before us? One thing, of course, is this property on the corner of State and Huron and this beautiful but aging building. Methodism began in Ann Arbor in 1827 and for the first ten years of the Ann Arbor Methodist Society, they met in homes or local buildings. The congregation quickly grew, so in 1837, they decided to build a church building on the corner of Ann Street and Fifth Avenue. Only 30 years later, the congregation had grown so much they couldn't fit in that building anymore. So, they bought property on the outskirts of town - at the corner of Washington and State Street - and built a beautiful new church with three spires and a large sanctuary. Of course, building a new building was expensive. People contributed however they could. Several of the trustees even mortgaged their homes. Finally, in 1867, the new church was dedicated.

All was well until 1907 when one of the steeples was struck by lightning and caught fire. Again, the congregation pooled their resources to repair the fire and water damage to the building. Disaster struck again in 1930 when the trustees learned that the walls of the building were spreading outward. In some places, the north and south walls were up to four inches out of plumb. Soon after that, they discovered that the roof trusses had spread apart and, if they weren't corrected soon, the building would collapse. The congregation moved to the Michigan Theater while enough repairs were made to make the church usable, but it was clear they needed a new building.

Of course, 1937 was the middle of the Depression. Almost everyone was just scraping by. A building that would house both the church and the growing Wesley Foundation would cost \$300,000. Mr. Harry Earhart and Mr. Sebastian Kresge each agreed to contribute \$100,000 on two conditions. One, that the congregation raised the last \$100,000 and two, that there would be no debt when the building was completed. Despite the devastating financial times, the congregation was able to come up with \$100,000 and this building where we sit today was constructed. We get to enjoy the beauty of this space as we worship thanks to their faithful giving. Now it is our turn to decide what kind of building is best suited for new generations of Christ-followers who worship here.

Another example of what we have inherited from church members of the past is our commitment to service and social justice. Both First United Methodist Church and Glazier Way UMC which became Green Wood and is now our Saturday worshipping congregation have long histories of caring for others and advocating for the oppressed or marginalized. As early as 1847, we were already involved in missions, and we sent off one of our younger members, Judson Collins, to do mission work in China. Many other church members followed him there in the years that followed. Of course, the church sponsored mission work in a number of other countries, as well, including Korea, Bolivia, Japan, and Haiti.

Over time, the nature of how churches reach out globally has changed to focus more on relationships and sustainable help and less on conversion. Today, we have a long-standing relationship with one community in Kenya, Meru, where we have built a thriving secondary school, established a feeding program for younger children, and worked to strengthen and support the area primary schools. In addition, we have sent a number of work teams to Costa Rica in recent years to help build a Methodist orphanage there.

Naturally, some of our efforts in service have been more local. In 1960, our church sponsored a refugee family from Holland. We found a house for them, and members of the church furnished it. The MYF did yard work and repairs on the house, and the UMW filled the refrigerator. In 1970, one of our church members, Janet Crabtree, came up with the idea of the House By The Side of the Road, which we have supported financially and with volunteers ever since.

In more recent years, we have taken four weeks of providing food and supplies to Alpha House each year, started the Love Thy Neighbor lunch program for the unhoused, provided Christmas gifts for area children in need, and supported the work of the Hope Clinic, Community Action Network, Food Gatherers, and other local service agencies.

But our outreach hasn't been limited to service and mission. Social justice has also been an important part of our calling here at FUMC. In 1963, members of our church picketed City Hall to advocate for affordable housing every time the City Council met. We had our own chapter of the United Methodist Commission on Race and Religion as well as a group which focused specifically on hunger. In the late 1960's, the church had a very active Peace Committee which sent letters to Congress and the President opposing the Vietnam War. Peace became an important topic again in the late 80's when a Sunday Morning Peace Class and Peace Study and Action Committee was formed. Meanwhile, the Church and Society Committee held Sunday brunches for the congregation to study and take action on homelessness, poverty, capital punishment, environmental concerns, and other issues of the day.

Of course, in more recent years, we have taken a stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church by passing our welcoming statement in 2007; long before our denomination and many others recognized the divine worth of all of God's children. Some ten years later, a group formed to address issues around immigration and, with their help, we voted to be a Solidarity Sanctuary church and to support sanctuary churches with our time and resources. Through the last several decades, we have also worked hard to create a church that is accessible to those with disabilities.

There are many other wonderful aspects of our church life that we have inherited from those who came before us - outstanding kids and youth programming, relevant faith formation opportunities for adults, compassionate caring ministries, and amazing music are among them. We are incredibly blessed and we have an incredible responsibility.

In our scripture reading for today, Moses is speaking to the Israelites who have wandered in the wilderness for forty years and are about to cross over into the promised land. He wants them to recognize what God is about to give them. When they cross into Canaan, they are going to find large, beautiful cities that they didn't build, nice homes with plenty of food they didn't grow, wells that someone else dug, and vineyards and olive trees that they didn't plant.

Like them, we have been given a huge gift - a healthy, vital, and impactful church. The congregations in the past have done amazing work. Now it is time for us to pick up the mantle. What work did they not complete? How will we address the challenges of an older building? What needs and social justice issues are ours to learn about and then find creative ways to address?

Next week, you will receive the first mailing in our “Pick it Up. Pass it On.” giving campaign. Included will be a pledge card that we ask you to fill out and turn in so we know what you plan to give to the church next year. As you prayerfully consider your giving, know that what you give to FUMC is what enables us to pick up the work of those who have gone before us and do our part in forming disciples, serving others, praising God, and loving each other until it is time to pass it on. And that, without doubt, is from the Bible.

May it be so. Amen.