

Shade We Know We'll Never Sit In

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-19

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It's stewardship season here at First Church. We're just coming off a wonderful year celebrating our tricentennial. And we're waiting expectantly to hear the feedback and proposals from the futures team who have compiled all we felt God is instilling in us for the next 100 years in the face of a world changing so rapidly it is difficult not to get whip lash watching it.

I'm just past one month into my time with you as Acting Associate Minister. This is my first full-time ministry role and my first ordained ministry role. So, for all of those reasons, I've been thinking about church ó what is it? What makes it tick in this day and age?

Yesterday morning, after Geordie and I had talked about the possibility of him needing to take time to recuperate this morning, I had this sermon time on my heart and in my thoughts. It also so happened that I was out with Dawne and some of the middle and high school youth doing a couple of service projects yesterday morning, and I learned something about church that I wanted to try and explore with you today.

I'd like to begin by drawing your attention to the quote in your order of worship, a quote from Oscar Romero:

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and do it very well.

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

Please pray with me:

Gracious God – your word is light for our paths; your presence gives us strength for each day. Thank you. We open our minds to your voice this hour; speak so we can understand and live in ways to honor you. With our whole selves, we are alert for your guidance. Amen.¹

Yesterday morning, just a day like many others in the life of our church community, a group of members ó in this case middle and high school youth ó got together to do some service work. Each person brought a rake along, and we visited the homes of older church members to help do a little cleanup and yard work. I saw young kids singing, raking, chopping, playing, moving things. I saw elders advising, interacting, providing snacks, sharing stories, and opening their homes. But here's what I really saw: Seeds planted that will one day grow. Seeds watered, knowing they hold future promise. Foundations laid and yeast provided that will produce effects far beyond our capabilities.

¹ <http://www.sermonsuite.com/free.php?i=788034832&key=siQg9wqnies6kfoN>

It reminded me of a story I'd heard since coming to this country about the American nut ó the pecan. My friend, Google, has since told me that while it takes a number of years for a pecan tree to reach fruit-producing age, they can then live and bear edible fruit for more than 300 years, growing into expansive and statuesque specimens hundreds of feet high and wide.

So the story, it goes something like this:

Down South, a young man, walking along a dirt path, comes upon an old man bowed to the ground planting pecan trees in a field. He stops and asks the old man, "Why would you plant pecan trees? They'll take so many years to mature that you'll never enjoy the pecans."

The old man responds, "I plant these trees because all my life I've eaten pecans from trees I did not plant."

This is the church, friends. This is who we are as the church.

I already know how much this church has done and is doing in the wider community that will live far beyond each of our lifetimes. Small acts like giving out food vouchers to people who stop by the church office, bringing in a few items of food each week, and taking those deliveries over to the food pantry. And big projects like building a house, a home for a family. Sending funds from our bounty to places we cannot reach in person to bless others ó our neighbors far and near. Just take one look at the service and outreach bulletin board in the 3rd floor hallway and you'd be amazed at all we do in the world.

This is the church! This is us ó the body of Christ.

And I wonder how many of you might share stories of what this church has meant to you, personally, if I asked right now, this morning. I suspect that if I handed the microphone out and we passed it back and forth and got into it, we'd be here for one of those old-time daylong Congregational church meetings!

I've been blessed in my first month with you to visit a bit with some of you. I've seen in one home a picture of this church, this steeple proudly and prominently displayed. I've heard about how this church remembers members with flowers, visits when you are in hospital, ill, or recovering. How you've been loved through difficult diagnoses, the loss of loved ones, and the joys of marriage, babies, and empty nests. I've heard how cherished this church is to so many of its members in the stories told about long ago and also in the hours that are put in amidst today's busy lives ó teaching children, meeting and deliberating, delivering flowers and ministering.

This is the church. Together we are the church. Does the church always get it right? No, we don't.

Anyone who has been part of a church for longer than a few minutes can likely testify. Sometimes, the message about an illness or a hospitalization doesn't get to the church or the ministers, and no one comes to your door. Sometimes, a matter of church business becomes contentious and we seek to get our own way rather than God's way. Sometimes, we treat each other in a way that doesn't see Christ in ourselves or the other person.

Remember Oscar Romero's words ó what we do may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

This is the church, a place for broken people who make mistakes, not perfect, shiny, faultless people; and a place for people who have the grace to recognize their own sinfulness in the sins of others.

A place where we forgive each other as we seek to be forgiven. A place where we show the love we wish to receive ó God's love.

Friends, this is the church.

It is a place where we each play our part through the seasons of our lives. Sometimes, we are offering assistance raking leaves and stretching young muscles, at another time, we are teaching in the church school, or serving on a ministry team, and in another season of our lives, we are opening our home, accepting help and sharing memories represented by things like World War II blankets stored on a high shelf in a garage, steeped in memories of a trial bravely fought so long ago and of family football games and picnics, of lives richly lived, of 64 years of marriage, of the loss of a beloved spouse.

This is the church.

We are more than a community service agency or a social club. We are also not just a not-for-profit 501(c)3. If we were just these things, why would anyone ó why would you ó bother to come here, versus having membership in another do-gooding organization?

Here's why: Because here we name the gifts we are given, and the work we do together is a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Here we give witness that the variety of gifts we are given are given by the same Spirit; here we acknowledge and celebrate that it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

This is a unique place! It is a place where faith intertwines and connects our lives, each within ourselves, but also one to another. We are knit together in community in a unique way because together we make up the body of Christ ó not just a hodgepodge of do-gooders! Here I am the foot, to Lynn's hand, and Brenda is the eye, and Joy is the ear.

We are each different, and we might go through seasons of our lives when we change from an eye to an ear, yet always each person in the church is unique and is needed in this very special place.

As you consider your pledge and your volunteerism this next year, consider the Greek proverb: "A society grows great when [people] ~~old men~~ plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

For the last 300 years, people of faith have óplanted treesö here, and right up until this moment we sit in the shade of trees we didn't plant. Faithful people who heard God's call to ministry in good times and through the Depression, during and after wars, fires, and ministers coming and going. Their actions defied logic sometimes. And yet, here we are. Looking ahead to the next 300 years.

Will you please plant a tree through your giving?

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