A Time to Celebrate

Fifth Sunday of Easter-Heritage's 35th Anniversary Celebration, May 18, 2003
Heritage Congregational Church, Madison, WI

Once there was a group of believers. They loved God and they knew that God loved them. They were faithful to God, seeking to live lives that followed the great commandment, loving both God and neighbor. They knew who they were as God's people. And, they worshipped. They gathered as a community to praise and pray, to sing and to glorify.

But after a time, something happened. They no longer felt that they could worship freely. They felt that something was keeping them from God in their place of worship. This was not a good feeling. They knew that nothing could separate them from God, but that is exactly how they felt. Perhaps, they thought, God is calling us to a new way of worship, to a new way of being church. Through much prayer and discernment, the believers took a leap of faith.

They left their place of worship and formed a new fellowship. Of course, as always happens when God's people are involved, some left for all the right reasons. Others, however....well, you know!

This was not an easy move. It was difficult and painful. They were leaving people they had worshipped with, people that they loved. They were leaving the place of their faith memories behind. They were venturing out into new territory, into the unknown. Their comfort level was gone.

But as they gathered to worship, God was there with them. God gave them direction and inspiration. God kept their faith strong. God gifted them with whatever was needed to feel a sense of community in their new gathered body. The believers adopted a covenant, a document expressing their faith and filled with their promises. By this they would live.

God even provided them with the gift of another congregation who offered them a space in which to worship. And even though this congregation was of a different faith, the believers grew in faith and grew in numbers from their association with this other congregation.

When God provided the gathered body with a new worship space, a place of their own, a church home, the covenanted people grew and flourished. God watered and pruned. The Spirit gave gifts. Christ was alive in their midst. Things were good. Once again, they knew who they were as God's people. Their sense of identity was strong. They reveled in the faith, freedom and fellowship of the way they had chosen. The future was bright and they were filled with hope. They were bearing fruit to the glory of God.

They were so fruitful, in fact, that they it wasn't long before they needed a new worship space to call home. And again, God provided. What else could a loving God possibly do? The believers planned and worked. They worshipped and built. And when they were at the height of their joy, just as they were to inhabit their new space, trouble struck.

It wasn't totally unexpected, but it wasn't totally expected either. It was very hurtful and the believers suffered. They suffered monetarily and they suffered emotionally. Worst of all, they suffered a crisis of faith. They wondered who they were. They experienced a loss of the joy they had felt, and they lost their sense of
trust.

And as always happens when trust is lost, there was a ripple effect of the troubles that the believers experienced. They were overwhelmed with sorrow. Filled with doubts and questions, communication broke down. Often, the people felt hopeless. The believers, clergy and laity alike, were not always filled with love towards each other or God. Their troubles escalated, when out of fear and sorrow, they said and did things that were very hurtful to one another and to God. Their sorrow multiplied. Things were not easy in the gathered body.

In spite of it all, and even though they couldn't always feel it, God was there. God was faithful and God sustained the gathered body. Even when the believers were ready to give up, God was not. God was tenacious and God persevered. God's purposes for the gathered body would not be forgotten. Nothing would keep them from journeying forward, because God was with them.

And so, God sent the believers help from the outside. Their sister churches rallied around them, offering support and Christian love. It was uplifting knowing that they were not alone. And, a group that was experienced with troubled churches were able to give counseling help.

Both of these helpers sent by God gave the people two great gifts—a chance to express themselves and work through their feelings, and an objective view of where they had been and how they gotten to the place where they now were. This was tough, listening to others and their observations, but God's love shone through and little by little things began to change. The believers once again took a leap of faith. They began talking to one another and honestly sharing their feelings and thoughts—with God's great love as their motivation. They made some tough decisions. It took a lot of work, a lot of patience and a lot of time. But before too long, the believers began to live again.

They could feel God breathing life back into them, giving them water for the thirst that had parched their faith and the bread of sustenance that they longed for. Slowly, but surely, the people remembered who they were and what they believed. They could once again feel God's presence. They once again felt free to love.

Now, the believers are stronger than they have ever been. They are healthy and they are filled with faith. And, because of the troubles they have endured, they have a renewed sense of how God is working in their midst.

Throughout their time together, God's love gave them whatever they needed. They learned that no matter what they did, good or bad, God purposes could not be moved. They learned that even when God's people are unfaithful, God is always faithful. They learned that nothing could break the connection that they had with Christ. He is the vine and they are the branches. God is the one in charge, the one who does the pruning. Apart from God, the people can do nothing. Their calling is to bring glory to God.

And in the end, the people are thankful. They are thankful for all they have been through—both good and bad, because now their faith is stronger. They can see and feel God in new ways. They are more intentional about living out their faith and more appreciative of God's blessings upon their gathered body, their church. They identified with Fred Craddock's statement, "Churches that move through hardship to increased commitment have indeed been pruned. The Church must undergo pruning for greater fruitfulness."

Today is the thirty-fifth anniversary of Heritage Church. It is truly a time to celebrate. God has sustained us. And, like David in his psalm, we turn to the Lord and worship. Our families worship, our church worships, and we pray that the ends of the earth will worship.

We are here, as a church, by the grace of God alone. We are overcome with God's goodness and power. We are filled with a sense of delight. We have much to celebrate and we invite the whole world to join in the celebration. That is where the Spirit is leading us. When we see how God has worked here, how can we do otherwise? Today is all about God! To God be the glory!

Peace,

Rev. Cynthia Bacon
Minister

You may email at:
cbacon@heritagemadison.org

Return to the top of the page.
Back to the Sermon Archives
Back to the Heritage home page.

Certified Web Author and Publisher: R. Dan Nelson
rnelson@madison.k12.wi.us

This page was last updated on May 19, 2003.