

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

Acts 2: 42 – 47

*** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

**A few years ago, Google released a database of over 5 million books published between 1500 and 2008. You can now enter a search word into the database and discover how often words have been used over the centuries, see the trends and patterns.

Based on this data, The New York Times columnist David Brooks offers what he calls the "story of the last half-century." The first part of this story, he says, is the rise of individualism. In the past 50 years, "individualistic words and phrases increasingly overshadowed communal words and phrases." For example, the following individualistic words and phrases have been used more frequently: "self," "personalized," "I come first," "I can do it myself." But in contrast, these communal words have been used less frequently: "community," "share," "band together," "common good."

The second part to the story Brooks sees is the decline in moral virtue. Certain words were especially hard hit, including words associated with courage or gratitude. But all of the following words have dropped in usage: "modesty," "humbleness," "discipline," "honesty," "patience," "faith," "wisdom," and even "evil."

Brooks offers an interpretation for these trends: (very interesting, as he is not writing from a specifically Christian perspective)

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

"So the story I'd like to tell is this: Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked...¹

** We're beginning a series of messages this weekend that will culminate the week before Thanksgiving (which happens to be the last weekend of the liturgical calendar, Advent begins the next week). As we have been doing for the past 10 years, on that Weekend, we will be writing and consecrating our Personal Covenants with God. We'll have plenty of time to talk about that in the weeks to come, but, basically, these covenants are statements that we design which spell out our intention of living as a disciple of Jesus Christ in the coming year. They are as specific as we can make them, answering questions like, "What is my plan for spiritual Growth this year?", "What is my plan for worship", "What is my giving expectation? and serving", "Who is going to walk with me in this journey?" and more.

If you've been part of this church over a previous covenant making time, you'll know that the word "personal" in "Personal Covenants" means that these documents are totally between you and God. We collect a sealed copy (you keep one), but we do not open them, read them, or record the results in any way. We consecrate them on the communion rail, and I keep them until the Summer when I will mail them back to you as a reminder of our promises to God.

In preparation for our covenants, in our preaching in the Fall of the past 10 years we have focused attention on who we are as the Church, the Body of Christ. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ in the present age? What are the key components of a Christian life? It is always a good thing to come back (even if it's only once a year) to 'the basics'; to remember who we are, so that we can have a better idea of where we're going, and how to get there.

In that regard, the series of messages we begin today is going to do that by "Revisiting our 'Mission Statement'". We're going to break it down, and examine it; we're going to

¹ David Brooks, "What Our Words Tell Us," *The New York Times* (5-20-13)

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

'unpack' it a bit. And Lord willing, you'll find that there's a lot of implications woven into those twenty words.

** We're starting this today (and next week) by looking at a very important word that comes right at the beginning of that statement.... First United Methodist Church is a *community*. I want you to begin to think about what that means for us, and we'll continue this discussion next week, as we consider another defining word of our community. We are specifically a *community of faith*, a unique kind of community.

Now, that Google study that I mentioned is kind of disturbing to me, but my experience resonates with it's truth. I see it happening. And in a world where community, sharing, banding together for the common good is being pushed aside for a selfish and 'me-first' brand of culture, it is should be no surprise that values such as modesty, humility, discipline, honesty, patience, faith, wisdom, and such have suffered. (So many of those coincide with Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit!)

It is not surprising to me, because I have come to realize (and, I've shared this with some of you before, that I've come to realize it later in life - but, not *too late!*) the immense value of a real community. There are things important to us that happen in community that will not happen apart from community.

Writer and surgeon Dr. Atul Gawande said that he once asked a pharmaceutical rep how he persuaded doctors—who are notoriously stubborn—to adopt a new medicine.

He said, "Evidence is not remotely enough [its not enough to hand out brochures, videos, etc.] You must apply the rule of seven touches." Personally "touch" the doctors seven times, and they will come to know you; and, if they trust you, they will change. He was referring, not entirely to physical touches, but interactions - getting to know a person, listening to them.

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

That's why he stocked the doctor's closets with free samples - and did this in person. Then he could poke his head around the corner and ask, "So how did your daughter Debbie's soccer game go?" Eventually, this could become "Have you seen this study on our new drug? Would you like to give it a try?" As the rep had recognized, human interaction is the key force in overcoming resistance and speeding change².

** What this, and what David Brooks of the NY Times (who wrote the editorial about the change in words) are both affirming is something that we in the church should be aware of to the point that it shapes us through the ways that we intentionally structure our time, and make our choices of what is going to be the priorities of our lives. In this way: there are values that are very important to us as Christians that are affirmed, that grow, that develop and mature and are shared with the next generation by being in community.

Likewise, real change happens through the influence and in the context of Community. I'm referring to change that is important to us. We sing songs in worship like "Change My Heart, O God", "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" ('mold me and make me after thy will..'), "Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart" (...*make me* love thee as I ought to love) and a host of others. These are songs expressing the true desire of any person who is seeking God - that our ultimate 'goal' is to be made over, to become Christ-like in our actions, our choices, our attitudes, our responses to life's events. We want to know the peace of God in our lives, the blessing of God in our hearts, our families, our nation.

Do we really understand that those sorts of changes take place almost *exclusively* in the context of the Community of Christ? God molds our hearts into Christlikeness through interaction with others in the community of faith.

** *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.* (Proverbs 27:17)

² Atul Gawande, "Slow Ideas," *The New Yorker* (7-29-13)

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

Do you hear what I'm saying? There are changes that we *want to happen* to us that will *never* happen apart from a continued, steady, active, participation in this kind of community.

Do you hear how 'final' those words are? I really don't think I'm overstating this. So, the question is, how important is this to you? How committed are you to community? How 'deep' is your participation in it? We're going to talk about worship in this series of messages, and this is very closely related topic - we *need* corporate worship to grow as well. (Corporate worship is worship in community.) It's a spiritual *given*. God makes this very clear in Scripture.

But, let's be honest... many people, even within this community of faith have a rather hit-and-miss mentality when it comes to actual involvement in this community. I have lots of people who tell me how 'wonderful this church is', and how 'wonderful I am', but, frankly, I have to wonder how important it really is when the words don't match your behavior. I used to joke with some of my preacher colleagues and say to them, "I must be an incredible preacher! Because one sermon seems to be enough to last a lot of people 5 or 6 weeks! "Great message, pastor... I'll see you in a couple of months when I need another one!"

We have many high quality opportunities to learn, and grow, and serve, and, again, frankly, we should be filled to the seams with eager people... but, too often, we're not. Because often we haven't established the priorities that put community of faith at the top of our list of how we will use our limited time, and thereby we remove ourselves from the means to accomplish the most important things that we claim to want in our lives.

** Erwin Lutzer in Leadership Journal wrote about a program that was on the Animal Channel recently that showed a herd of buffalo and six lions. The lions were planning to have a buffalo steak for dinner...very rare. Well, they found one buffalo that had strayed from the herd, maybe a couple hundred yards, and they went after that buffalo. So how do a few lions stop a huge buffalo? One lion grabbed the heel of one back leg of the

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

buffalo, the other on the other back leg. And they just hung on until that buffalo slowed to a stop. Then one lion hopped on his back, another went after his stomach. And from there on you can just visualize what happened. It was gruesome.

But here's what was really kind of disturbing to him. There were perhaps 100 buffalo, if not more, all standing around and staring, and watching this go down. I don't know if buffalo can think. But if buffalo could think, you know what they're probably thinking?

"Boy, am I ever glad that's not happening to me!"

** Now, imagine if this herd had decided we're not going to let those lions get away with this anymore, and together they ran thundering in the direction of their 'brother' with their horns down. Those lions would have beat a hasty retreat! The lions would never have a buffalo sandwich, if the buffalo stuck together.

So, he continues: "There's a lesson for us here. First of all, Satan separates somebody from the herd. He makes them mad at the church and Christians, or angry because of some other reason. Once they're away from the herd, he intensifies his attack. And then when we hear of the spiritual struggles that a person faces [as they're cut off] we say to ourselves, "Boy, am I ever glad that's not me!"

But what we need to do as a congregation is to hang together. We have to close in and say we will not allow the devil to do this to our people and we won't allow him to do it to us. We're not going to get cut out of 'the herd'.

He says, "I think God wants us to humble ourselves, not just before him, but before others. Many people have been delivered from strongholds when they begin to share, and other people intercede for them.

** It's in community that God grants victory³.

** Now, what often messes us up, is when we see the conflict between the *Idea* of a Church, and the reality of the church, which is made up of real, fallen people. People

³ Erwin Lutzer, "A Contested Universe," *Leadership Journal* (Spring, 2012), p. 54

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

who are all 'in progress' as we are. The ideal is, of course, perfect, beautiful, and it always works as it should. But the real church - as Eugene Peterson observed - is composed of equal parts mystery and mess. Because we are, too.

** I shared with you listening to Pastor Lillian Daniel speak last Spring in a clergy gathering, and then read her book When "Spiritual But Religious Is Not Enough" . I shared some of her writing with you in another message. In thinking about community, I remembered how in a different passage she described a conversation she once had with a father who went to great lengths to explain to her why it is that he no longer attends church. That he has come up with the amazingly novel idea that he can find 'God in nature', so as he jogs in the park on Sunday mornings, and eats his bagel with the New York Times, he 'feels closer to God than he does in Church.'

But in that conversation, Rev. Daniel says that this dad went on to point out the 'wisdom that his son was receiving' (and giving) with these no-church arrangements. Here's how she puts it:

"Realizing that as a pastor I was desperately in need of reeducation, he went on to explain that his own little junior theologian, now a teenager, had bowled him over with another great insight, a brilliant thought exchange between father and son that made the dad realize that his choice not to attend church was the right one, for his son had truly embraced the values he had always hoped he would.

Listen to what my son wrote, he said. "Children are starving with empty bellies in faraway lands. They have nothing to eat. All around them they hear the sounds of gunfire and bombs going off. And it made me realize that we are so lucky. We are so lucky to be living here and not there."

"I had tears in my eyes when he said that," the proud parent explained. "I was blown away and I realized, he gets it, he really gets it. It was gratitude. That's our religion -

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

gratitude. And at that moment, when he recognized all that suffering and how fortunate he was, I could not have been prouder."

Never been prouder? I thought. Really? I mean, I can see being proud that your kid watches the news. I can see being a little proud that he understands himself to have privileges in this country that other people do not. I can see being a little relieved that he knows not everyone goes to bed with a full stomach, that he can at least imagine the fact that war causes unimaginable pain. But then what? The punch line from the religion of gratitude: "We're so lucky that we live here instead of there." Really? That's it? Never been prouder?

What's missing from this worldview - and this is no fault of the teenager - but what is missing from that worldview is the perspective that you might get in a Christian community that would take you from lucky to actually doing something about it. But this kid didn't get there...

His dad was happy to stop with the self-made religion of gratitude, like a person who fills up on the deep-fried appetizers and doesn't order anything else from the menu. He may not feel hungry for dinner now, but that snack will not sustain him for anything like real exertion. It tastes good, but it's just not enough...

When you witness suffering and declare yourself to have achieved salvation in the religion of gratitude, you have fallen way short of what God would have you do, no matter what religion you are called to...⁴

... and let's get back to that proud father as an example. When he told me about his son, it finally hit me what was bothering me about this self-styled religion he had invented - he hadn't invented it at all. It was as boring and predictable as the rest of our self-centered consumer culture, and his very conceit, that this outlook was somehow original, daring, or edgy, was evidence of that very self-centeredness.

⁴ When "Spiritual But Religious Is Not Enough" p. 7 - 9

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 1 We Are A Community . . .

If we made a church for all these spiritual but not religious people, if we got them all together to talk about their beliefs and their incredibly unique personal religions, they might find out that most of America agrees with them. But they'll never find that out. Why? Because getting them all together would be way too much like church. And they are far too busy being original to discover that they are not.

But here in church, we hear scriptures like the one ... where we hear Jesus say to ordinary, fallible Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church." In other words, you people are stuck with one another.⁵

** But then again, it is through this community, and others like it that Jesus will build up, will make people like himself. Disciples who through community have been changed into his likeness, and who then, in community, will change the world.

⁵ When "Spiritual But Religious Is Not Enough", p. 11 - 12