

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 A Community of *Faith*

Ephesians 1: 15 - 23

***For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

***I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked,*

*** not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

****** Last week we began preparation for the making of our Personal Covenants with God (which will happen the weekend before Thanksgiving) by starting this series of messages in which we will be re-visiting our Mission Statement. The purpose of doing this is to reflect together on who we are as a church, to remind ourselves of what it means to be a fully formed disciple of Jesus Christ in today's culture. We need to know who we are, so that we can know where we're going, and how to get there.

I began this series last week by sharing with you a rather passionate picture of the value of a real community. In that message I made some pretty blunt statements – such as this one:

*** 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.*

I think that Scripture and experience affirm this over and over again: God works through community. The things we learn, and the seeds that God plants in our hearts in 'private' (in our devotional reading, scripture study, etc.) become part of our lives by working them out *in community*, not in isolation. So, we can say that something is important to us, but our *actions*, as always, speak much louder than our words. So, I asked you last week to consider this: how important is this Church to you? How committed are you to this community? How 'deep' is your participation in it? Do your actions support your words?

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 **A Community of *Faith***

[Can I ask you to do something for me? There were a lot of people from our worshipping community, who, (ironically I suppose) were not here last week, for whatever reasons. If you weren't here, would you please go to our Website, download that message and just read it? If you know someone who wasn't here, and you don't see them this week, maybe you could download it and give it to them, and say, "Pastor Steve asked us all to read this. It's kind of important. Would you take a few minutes and do that?" Thank you!]

** I want to continue in thinking with you about Community by narrowing the subject down to something even more specific. Our Mission Statement begins by stating that we are a *community* (and, that's what we looked at last week. What does that mean... why is it important?) But it goes on and says that we are not just *any* kind of community, we are not just a generic community, we are a unique community: a community of *faith*.

Some of you were here when we started kicking around ideas for a 'mission statement'. (That would have been about 12 or 13 years ago.) I shared with the congregation back then that a mission statement should not be an 'idealized' projection of what we *should* be, but for a healthy church with as much history as ours, a mission statement really should be an description of *who we are*. What is it that we do, that makes us unique? What's in our 'Church DNA'? As part of the Body of Christ, what has God called *us* to do?

So, we received a number of suggestions from people, which were mostly drawn from other congregation's mission statements, some were original, and we had discussions about the various merits of each of these suggestions. It was a couple of *years* later that we actually made the decision to accept the current statement as 'a working mission statement'. (Something that we never actually made permanent by a vote, but clearly, we have accepted it by consensus!)

** Anyway, I remember one item that came up in the discussion of this statement. Someone suggested that instead of the word 'faith', it would be better for it to read, 'belief' or 'believers'. I was not in favor of that, and ultimately we did not make that change.

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 **A Community of *Faith***

But here we are today, revisiting that mission statement, which means, that I've been carefully reconsidering every word. And, I have to say, that that question takes us right to the heart of the meaning of this statement, and the foundation of this Church in mission and ministry to the world.

Many people use the words 'faith' and 'belief' as nearly interchangeable. Back then – some 10 years ago, I did not. Today, I am even more convinced that they are not the same thing! Now, clearly these two words are related – their meanings overlap in some significant ways.

In essence, my response to the one who made that suggestion was that I see 'faith' and 'belief' as very different entities, if you think of them in terms of 'movement'. Faith is *active*, Belief is *static*.

Beliefs can change, of course. And as we grow in our understanding of Scripture, and ourselves, as we have more life experience, we find that our beliefs are adjusted. They evolve, they are re-prioritized, they are clarified. All of this is normal, and, good.

But, in the bigger picture, once we have affirmed faith in Christ, and have connected with the Body of Christ in a local congregation, the parts of our beliefs that may change after that are mostly peripheral things – the *essence* of them, generally, stands intact for our entire lives. In that sense, they're static.

Now, I hope you aren't picking up any negative 'vibe' from me about the process that I just described, because there is none intended. The fact that we can have a belief system that stands relatively unchanged through good times and bad, through ups and downs of life, when we are young and when we are old... well, this gives a steadfastness to our Christian lives. We can be consistent, we can predict with some certainty what we will be like in 20 or 50 years from now. (For me, that would be *dead!*)

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 **A Community of *Faith***

So, beliefs may change... but if they do, it is a slow process, and it doesn't (shouldn't) come easily. Which is what leads me to characterize – in comparison – faith and belief like this:

** Belief is *static* but faith is *dynamic*. Think of it like this...

Belief – An opinion or judgment in which a person is fully persuaded. So our beliefs are things that we are thoroughly convinced of. Usually (but not always) they are ideas, concepts that we gather through acquiring information and experience. Because of that, our beliefs can change over time as we gain more knowledge and experience more things throughout our lives, but the change is slow, if it comes at all.

Faith includes our beliefs, but it is bigger than that.

** Faith requires action. If it doesn't move us to *do* something or *say* something – to actually take some kind of action – then it's not really faith at all.

** You might remember James saying it like this

*So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds,
it is dead and useless.– James 2:17*

Until it leads us to take action, our “faith” is just a bunch of words. We can have all the right ‘beliefs’ in the world – we can know all there is to know about the Bible, about theology, about truth... but we are not living the life that God will bless, a life that pleases God, unless we are *acting on those beliefs*. And *that*, friends, is the first characteristic of faith.

“A community of believers”, by contrast, is a community based on beliefs. What is the problem with a community based on ‘beliefs’? Well, I see numerous problems – aside from the understanding that, as Paul wrote, ‘now we see as through a mirror darkly’ (i.e., there is so much that we don't know) human nature being what it is, our tendency in a belief based community is to continually attempt to darken the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

** “Us” being the people with the ‘right’ beliefs... and “them” being everybody else! Being part of a belief-based community means that you have expressed an intellectual agreement with a *list* of doctrines, positions, statements... you ‘buy in’ and that, conceivably, can be ‘it’

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 **A Community of *Faith***

for you. You're done. You're in. (As long as you don't change your beliefs – or *we* don't – you're Ok!) I'm part of the community.

I think there is something in the spiritual genealogy of a United Methodist congregation, tracking our heritage back to John Wesley, as we do, that makes us shudder to think that this is a good foundation for a church! John Wesley, as you may know, never wrote a book of Systematic Theology. He never specifically said, "Here's what we believe as Methodists".

The First Methodist Churches (as we do today) listed the 'Articles of Religion' as the basic description of our theology (Wesley reduced the 39 Articles of religion from the Anglican Church to 25). They are our doctrinal foundation (as people called Methodists), and have been since 1808. In addition to these, from John Wesley himself, we have volumes, not of systematic theology, but of *sermons*!

I can tell you from many years of personal experience that sermon writing is different than writing theological treatises - because by definition they are *practical* expressions of our beliefs, and the common denominator in Wesley's sermons is

** not *what* do we believe, but *who* do we believe in? He never specifically wrote a book saying, "Here's what we believe as Methodists" but he had *a lot* to say about "Here's who we believe *in*", and because of that, 'here's how we should live'.

What we *do* in response to a Scripture, a teaching, a doctrine, this relationship with the living Word is really the most important issue before us as a Church. That was something that required constant thought, and prayer – it is *dynamic*. That's where Wesley was, and that's our legacy as Methodists.

So, for us to claim that we are a Community of *Faith*, to say that this is the bottom line of our being as a local Body of Christ, has great implications for every one of us here today. Every person who is part of this church.

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 A Community of *Faith*

I began this message by reading Paul's great prayer for the church in the city of Ephesus. This is one of the greatest passages in all the epistles, one of the greatest prayers in Scripture, and it merits much more attention that we're going to give it today. I hope you can take some time today to read it slowly, and prayerfully.

But for now, please notice this – in the midst of his wonderfully vivid (& typically wordy!) descriptions of the surpassing greatness of Christ Jesus, Paul says in this prayer that from the first day that he heard about their church – about the life that is in them, the power of the Spirit that is working among them, that he hasn't stopped giving thanks for them, *and praying for them*. And he includes four requests that he *constantly* asks from God on their behalf:

- *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, **so that you may know him better**.*

(The next three requests are all related, and are really, sub-points of the second petition, but I'm counting them separately.)

- *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know*
 - *the **hope** to which he has called you,*
 - *the **riches** of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and*
 - *his incomparably great **power** for us who believe*

If you look at all these prayer requests together, you see something quite unexpected. Paul is praying that God would open the eyes of the hearts of the people in this church so that they would be **able to know** the hope of their calling, the riches that God has for them, and the incredible spiritual power that is available to them. But the thing is, he's already pointed out that this is a vital, living, congregation; this is one church that he just can't stop giving thanks to God for, because they're so *alive!* So healthy! (As we would say today, "SO VITAL!")

Yet he's asking God for these petitions that sound like basic starting points for a Christian life! What I get from that is that he's saying to the people in the church of Ephesus (and the

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2 **A Community of *Faith***

Methodist Church of Moorestown) 'don't even think that you've reached the final page of your spiritual discoveries'! There's so much more! There's so much deeper that you can go! So much more that God wants to give you, and show you, and reveal to you!

So much more of his love and grace than you can ever imagine! There is more blessing, and hope, and power yet to come – so much more, it's as if we've just begun this journey.

To me, that's the picture that I hold in my mind when I think of a Community of Faith. It's a group of people focused, not on the statements of faith that we have come to at this point in our walk (however well expressed and complete they may seem to be right now). But our focus is on Jesus Christ, on the living relationship we have with him.

A relationship that calls us not simply to *know* scriptures, not simply to know *about* spiritual stuff, but a relationship that compels us to act on what we know... to steadfastly live out our faith, through the dual activities of outward and inward focus.

Meaning, going deeper internally, deeper into God, into faith, cultivating that living relationship; and going outward at the same time in service and witness to a hurting world as a constant expression of that inward commitment.

Similarly to what I shared last week, I know – we know – that we hold both of these ideals as standards, as goals, with the full recognition that we are human; knowing that we will frequently stumble and fall. So I hear of occasional examples – from this community – of times when people forget who we are, and say things, and do things that, instead of erasing that line between 'us' and 'them', instead of inviting people in to this amazing journey of life as we follow Jesus Christ together – instead, I do hear of times when we build barriers. When we seem more intent on cutting people out, and sifting through the culture to assure that only 'people like us' are 'in'. We do things I wish we wouldn't and we let things go that I wish we hadn't. That's life in the real world, friends.

But, more often than not... I hear the opposite kind of testimony. And, like Paul for the Ephesian church, whenever **I** hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and **your** love for

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 2
A Community of *Faith*

God's people – a love that is expressed, not just in words, but in actions, in sacrificial giving and serving, by going the second mile, by great acts of forgiveness, grace, and faith – when I hear of these things, I give thanks for you, remembering you in *my* prayers... but at the same time, asking God that you would understand that we've only begun to break ground in the quest to plumb the depths of what God has in store for all of us!

As a community of dynamic faith... may God draw us together in a pure unity that is centered and focused on him, and is expressed through our commitment to mission as we share our riches with those around us.