

“A Church of Signs and Wonders”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
September 14, 2014

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Part of our Rally Day, of course, is about reading a new book. Many of us in the church are reading this book called “Reading the Bible Again For the First Time”. It is a book by Marcus Borg. As you can tell from the title, it is about reimagining what the Bible has to say to us, reimagining and learning about what and how it was written, who wrote it, what was the intent, what was the historical context of it, and so forth and so on. It comes out of the sense that the modern world has really changed in some powerful and fundamental ways, so reading the Bible again is required so that we, in some fundamental way, re-learn the Bible or, perhaps for some of us, learn it the first time.

The Bible is only one means. We are involved in a reimagining of the church. You can see in our newspapers, in our news outlets, on the Internet, certainly in some of the Christian outlets for news that I am involved with, that there is, and has been for a long time now, a discussion about the church. The old church is almost on its last breath, and something new is arriving. Something new is growing out of the ashes, and it is not like it once was. It is not like Peace Church was 50 years ago. It is very different, so the church is sort of struggling with what does this new form of the church look like, who is in the new church, what do we wear to church, how do we worship, what do we sing, how do we pray, how do we understand the Bible, and what is it all about. It is all up for grabs, and it all needs to be reimagined. It is no news that that's sort of what we are doing in this church. We are slowly, but surely, reimagining what church can be, partly so it will live but, more importantly, so that the church will be newly faithful to our new world and what it demands.

In the reimagining of the church, we are moving into uncharted territory. We don't know what it looks like out there and we are, in a sense, making it up as we go. We will skip along, we will fumble along, and we will have moments of clarity and great joy and success, and we will do other things that will, perhaps, fall on its face, but we are in uncharted territory, but I do want to say that, on some fundamental level, the mission of the church is the same.

I want to spend a little bit of time just talking about, simply, from those two texts from the Book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, what some of those mission pieces are of the church that remains timeless and what it is that we are about. We're going to think about how to do it in new ways, but we're going to essentially, in some ways, do what the church has always done.

When I went down with my family to Latin America, we went to Guatemala, Cuba and Venezuela. Part of my study (We always do a sabbatical and it always has a study to it.) was to see what the church does in socialist nations. When we went to Cuba and to Venezuela, we were looking at what the church does in socialist nations. That was the most boring part of the sabbatical because what we learned was the church in socialist countries does exactly what the church does in capitalist countries. We worship, we fellowship, we study the Bible, we do mission work. There was no difference in what the church does in those nations in Cuba, Venezuela and Guatemala, for that matter. That was a very short part of my learning. The church does what it always does, so what is that? What is it that the church always does?

If you read the Book of Acts, you know that it is about the early church. Jesus has resurrected. It is about a church that is completely in uncharted territory. They have no history to look back on to say “Well, you know, we did it like this back then”. They don’t have that. They are doing a new thing like we are, and they are a church that is on fire with the Holy Spirit. So, in the Book of Acts, you have story, after story, after story of conversions and healings and all kinds of wild things going on, tied up closely with the Holy Spirit transforming people’s lives. Here is how it begins.

In Acts 2:38, the words are “Repent and be baptized”, so one of the timeless missions of the church has to do with the word “repentance” and with being baptized. The best definition I have heard about repentance is just to say “Hey, look. We have in this faith in Jesus Christ the opportunity and the call to turn around. We can turn our lives around”. That is the offer of faith in Jesus Christ. You’ve seen it. God allows U-turns. That is what repentance is all about. We’ve got to turn our lives around because, if we don’t turn our lives around, we’re going to smash right into the tree of life. By repentance, calling people gently and making the offer of repentance, we can turn around and be baptized. So, come on in, turn your life around. We are offering a way to turn our lives around, and we are offering this opportunity to be baptized—that is, to claim personal transformation for your life. Baptism is that vow of personal transformation, so the church has been, is, and always will be about calling people to a different way of living. That is exciting to claim it for our own lives and to pronounce it to the world.

The story goes on in Acts, and I love this phrase from Verse 40, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation”. Turn around, be baptized and save yourself from this corrupt generation. That sounds like (and it is in a sense) kind of harsh language. It is layered with judgment about the world, but as I unpack that, this is what I hear in that “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation”. One is that it is a call, it is the work of the church, to help people move, and to help ourselves move, from an autonomy to community, moving from thinking that the whole world is just about me. That is autonomy—when you think you are responsible for you only and it is all about you getting what you want and so forth and so on.

I came up with a great image of autonomy. In the winter months, when it is really cold and I can’t run outside, I go to the “Y” (YMCA) to run. I really don’t enjoy this at all, so there I am on the treadmill at the “Y”. I am on the treadmill with 25 other people on the treadmill. I am running by myself, with earphones on, going nowhere very quickly. Now, I’m going to continue to do that just for health and well-being and so forth, but I thought “What an image of our contemporary world. Here we are, all together, totally isolated”. That is autonomy, or at least an image for it, but when we move to community, it is hard to transition, to move our consciousness from autonomy to community.

To save ourselves from the corrupt generation is to also move from self-centeredness for the common good. That is a critical component of Christian faith—being for the common good. We have lost that, but that is the concern of the gospel, the common good, not just self-centered good, but common good, so we move from autonomy to community, from self-centeredness to common good (and that includes conversations about taxes which we get nervous about). Also it means coming out of this corrupt generation to move from resentment to forgiveness.

Many of us are caught up in resentments—resentments about personal issues (perhaps in our families, friends or whatever) and resentments about what is going on in our world, but the Christian mission is to move from having an orientation where we are sort of bound up and tight and our fist is sort of like this (tight), to moving to forgiveness. For me, forgiveness is not really about forgiving every tiny little individual issue that comes our way, when someone steps on our toes and we forgive them. Forgiveness is embracing every human being and their “warts”. I have yet to meet a human being who doesn’t have some character flaw that could just drive me nuts, but if we operate out of forgiveness, we love them just the way they are. We work around those “warts”. Perhaps we can get to a point where we can embrace those “warts”. We have become in our world very, very much about resentment, so our mission as a church is to grow towards being a community of radical forgiveness and just embrace people for their humanness because we are all human. If you want to

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Last, but not least, for this, the corrupt generation, we’ve got to move from greed to generosity. I am really not talking about money here, although that’s the way we think of it, in terms of finances, but generosity of spirit, affirming that everyone is worthy of being loved and that God’s love is for everyone. It is important because, if we do not know that we are loved, it is very hard for us to be generous in terms of love for others, so to move from greed to generosity is really important.

Now, in Verse 42 of Acts, Chapter 2, it says “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayer and feasting, sharing all things in common”. The ministry of the church, again, is to push us towards community, living with one another, sharing with one another, studying with one another and, through that process, strengthen one another. We cannot be in the Christian journey alone. The Christian journey, the call of Christ, is always a call to community. We need each other. We really need each other because the call of Christ is extremely difficult. What Jesus taught was revolutionary—in His time and in our time, so we need to always be about community because we don’t know how we’re going to live this out. We need the strength of one another. Every one of us has wisdom that we need to share, and that is a critical part of our mission, and it always has been in the church.

There are two other issues about the ongoing mission of the church. This has to do with public ministry. In the Book of Acts, in the time of Jesus, the acts of Jesus, always there is this talk about healing—bringing the sick out into the streets, healing them with touch, healing them with spittle on the eyes, healing them with food. It is a physical, it is a mental, and it is a spiritual healing, so our ministry of the church is always going to be about healing people. Just as we need healing, Jesus calls us and sends us out to heal a broken world, and if you read the paper, if you look at the news on the websites, what you know is our world is broken—it is broken. That is the world that God sent Jesus into to make disciples and to go out and find ways to heal the brokenness and, through it, to find healing for our own lives.

Then, there is an irony to the Christian faith which is something that we don’t want to be a part of—we probably don’t feel comfortable with it—but the response to the Christian church, when it is doing what it is called to do is hostility. The apostles are rounded up. In the Book of Acts, they are always being sent to jail. They are always being brought before the authorities. That is simply a word to remind us that when we do the gospel, and when we do it right, we do not necessarily always get rewards. The Christian faith is not always easy. Those early followers of Jesus in the Book of Acts were always being brought before the authorities because they were teaching a different way. They were teaching in a way that was foundationally threatening to the order, so we can expect that. “Blessed are the persecuted” is what Jesus said at the Sermon on the Mount.

All this is to simply say that, on Rally Day, what we strive to be is a church of signs and wonders—a church of wonders and signs. The Book of Acts says again and again there were tremendous signs and wonders going on in that community of faith. The Spirit was moving, new things were happening, and it was all tied up with this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What they were part of, why there were signs and wonders, is because that early church, like the church of today, was participating in salvation history which is to say that they were participating in God’s healing agenda for the world that takes place throughout history and that is the call to the church, that all of us are to be healers. As much as we need to be healed, we are also called to be healers and when we heal, we are seeing signs and wonders of God in action. So...this is a day to simply recommit, to celebrate our community in all of its beauty, and with all of its “warts”, and to know that God is in the midst of everything that we do. God is going to call us, and continues to call us into some incredible ministries of reaching out into the world, giving people hope, giving people a place to find God’s love, so it is good to be together today in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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