

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 5, 2016

Third Sunday After Pentecost

2 Corinthians 3:1-6, 12-18

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

Here are some statistics about the history and pastors of our church:

From 1826 until now, there have been 21 pastors.

The average length they've stayed is 8 years and only 6 have served more than 10 years.

In the last 100 years, the average length of stay is 9 years.

There are often things pastors want to accomplish during their time at a particular church.

Sometimes these are obvious needs or goals set out by the search committee for which the pastor shares a vision.

Sometimes they emerge quickly in the first months of the ministry.

Sometimes they develop slowly over time and become clear through conversations over the years.

Sometimes churches will take these things on in a moment of decision.

Sometimes churches will find that they have grown in a new direction almost imperceptibly.

Sometimes the whole church is in on the moves.

Sometimes the lay leadership are the ones driving the change.

Sometimes the staff will make things happen.

Sometimes it is the pastor who will bring about a new way of doing things.

Looking back on the last 10 years, I can see things in our life together that fall into all of these categories. We have been growing steadily in faith and in health:

Financial health

Mission focused

Read and study together regularly

Business meetings are less rigid and more inviting for all to participate

The Apostles' Creed study and sermon series

Staff is stable

Sharing Christ - Changing Lives

What's so important about *Sharing Christ and Changing Lives* is that it keeps before us our purpose as a church. No matter what we undertake, we never take our eyes off of Jesus, we never cease praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and we never let anyone other than the Lord Jesus be our primary concern.

With that in mind, I'd like to share with you a few things that I think will keep us faithfully following Christ and growing more deeply in our faith in him as we look to the future. Some of these are easily undertaken and accomplished. Some are less measurable but still shape our identity as a church in significant ways.

The Building Project

Becoming welcoming and hospitable to ALL people with easy and obvious access to our sanctuary, Sunday School rooms and offices

A new hymnal

Our current hymnal is a conservative Baptist hymnal; and while it contains a lot of hymns we like, it's lacking in other ways. And there are a number of good hymnals that include the beloved hymns of our memory banks that are also more in line with our own tradition.

A more open/flexible understanding of who we are - characterized by outward and genuine expressions of personal faith rather than a surface understanding of membership.

A more nimble organizational structure, which makes decision making simple and transparent, and getting involved inviting and not complicated.

Equipment and systems and communication vehicles that make our lives easier here and support the ministries of the church in ways that make sense for 2016 and beyond.

Will we accomplish any, some, or all of these together? Who knows?

What does the future hold for us? Really, only God knows. But we can be confident that He is with us - leading - nudging - prodding...moving us along.

If you are hoping that things will stay the same - as they were in the past or as they are now - you'll probably be disappointed. And if you want things to be different right now - you'll be disappointed as well. And to be honest, during the past 10 years, there are people who've left the church for both of those reasons.

But, praise God, you haven't - and I haven't.

I think pastors and congregations that enjoy long healthy relationships do so because they are so focused on Christ, that they/we allow him to define our life together, rather than projecting our personal tastes or past hurts on to each other.

This is hard work and requires great grace. But the good news is that the power behind this grace that sustains us is the Holy Spirit, who transforms us, little-by-little and day-by-day, to become the people HE wants us to be.

When Jesus called his first disciples, he emphasized that transformation was not going to be immediate. That familiar verse (Mark 1:17): Jesus says, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers for people," is more nuanced than that. A closer translation would be: *Come behind me! I will help you become fishers of people.*

Transformation is gradual — "ever-increasing" and not all at once (2 Corinthians 3:18). Displaying the ripened fruit of the Spirit takes growth over time, with the right soil, and with the right Spirit-provided nutrients to feed us.

We can't and shouldn't think that anything we accomplish is our own doing. We are in the "committing to stay in the process and in the following Jesus" business. Jesus is in the "accomplishing great things" business.

The sermon title this morning is actually the title of a book written by Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. What a great phrase. The book focuses on 15 psalms that are pilgrimage psalms that Jews would sing and say while heading to Jerusalem for the high holy days.

It's also a good image for our personal journeys of faith; and for our relationships together in the church.

The destination is clear - every step we make takes us closer to God. We're all moving in the same direction - though we travel at different paces. While some of us like to run ahead, others of us like to pause every once in awhile to check out the scenery. But we keep moving - because as soon as we stop, we're no longer on the pilgrimage.

And so our commitment to follow Jesus - as individuals and as a church - is a long obedience in the same direction.

Our work is to daily commit and follow; his work is to help us become the church he is calling us to be. We supply the will to become, and he supplies the power to become. Along the way, we will at times get frustrated by our lack of immediate progress, our stumbling attempts at mature discipleship, and our lapses back into unhealthy patterns and unhelpful habits.

Which is why we need more than just patience with the process, we need forgiveness with each other.

And it's helpful during the harder stretches to remember Jesus' work on earth with the twelve apostles. How many times did the Lord have to overlook their mess ups, inconsistencies, failures, and disappointments? But by not giving up the journey, the disciples became more than they could become on their own. Jesus used these flawed people he was transforming to change the world with the good news of his grace.

But first, these flawed disciples needed to embrace Jesus' plan, and step out in faith.

I read a reflection this week written by a UCC pastor serving a church in Florida.

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Declare God's glory among the nations, God's marvelous works among all the peoples. (Psalm 96:1, 3)

One Sunday he'd chosen and unfamiliar hymn, and it turned out to be nearly impossible to sing. In fact the pianist stopped playing a verse before it was over.

It's painful singing a new song. Awkward. Embarrassing. A new song always goes up when we think it should go down, slows its pace just when we're ready to get faster. It always contains a secret two-beat rest we fail to note at the outset, leaving us singing poorly and alone as everyone else listens in silence. A new song has none of the treasured lyrics or moving melodies that we love in our old songs.

Listen to any choir or congregation sight singing their way through new material, and you'll wonder if the psalmist is a sadist to keep asking for new songs. You'll be excused for wondering whether God might prefer a well-rehearsed old chestnut to all of our tuneless struggle.

But no, God desires a new song. Because the new song we're attempting is a song of praise, a song of our God. And with every flubbed word and flat note we are not just learning another piece of music but being given another tiny piece of the mystery of God.

(Vince Amlin, pastor Gainesville FL)

Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (The Message)

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION

A joyful journey indeed.

Amen!