

The Words for this Week

June 13, 2021

This is a reading from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth about faith.

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

5:6 *So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord --*

5:7 *for we walk by faith, not by sight.*

5:8 *Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

5:9 *So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.*

5:10 *For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.*

5:11 *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.*

5:12 *We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart.*

5:13 *For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*

5:14 *For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.*

5:15 *And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

5:16 *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.*

5:17 *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

The songwriter Henry Alford, wrote the following words to the hymn which we have sung a number of times: *We walk by faith, and not by sight; no gracious*

words we hear from one who spoke as none e'er spoke, but we believe him near. That opening line is also from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth - *we walk by faith, and not by sight.* This should be common practice for those of us who profess to follow the Cross, yet every once and awhile, we might have to be reminded of these words, reminded of the fact that we walk - or perhaps more accurately - we should walk by faith and not by sight.

This is not to ignore the benefit of sight, because there is much that could be said about the gift of vision. Now most of us were reminded of the importance to watch where we were going. To look both ways before crossing the street is one of those invaluable lessons. It has less to do with faithfulness and more to do with common sense. There is also something to be said about watching where you are walking when you get up in the middle of the night. I'm sure if you stump your toe on a bed post or if you trip over a piece of furniture, your walking-by-faith will take a back seat to some self-reflecting about why didn't you simply turn on a light so that you could actually see where you were going.

The premise of today's message is how our faith can guide us, through all of the hurdles that life might place in front of us. It reminds us that our faith can be like or maybe even better than our eyesight, because it

allows us to imagine our pathway forward trusting that the Spirit will indeed guide us each step of the way.

Imagine being in new and foreign land, a place that is completely unfamiliar to you. Now let's factor in a language barrier and top it off with local customs that are seemingly out-of-step with any that you have experienced. So how do you go about addressing your basic needs? How will you eat? Where will you sleep? How do you get from point A to point B? Where can you go and what can you do to ensure that you will be safe, and that you will be welcomed?

Well, you have to step out on faith. You have to be willing to take an initial step forward, in what you hope, in what you believe is the right move. It might help to minimize the uncertainty by choosing options that are not that risky. For example, maybe you make your way over to a reputable travel agency, one that has a proven track record in helping folks that are in the situation that you find yourself in. Maybe you reach out to someone who might have some common ties to you, such as a person with related business connections, or a distant family friend. Maybe it is someone who offered a simple smile and who sensed your need to find your bearings.

Stepping out on faith requires just that - faith - a belief that even though your pathway might not be clear, that

it will start to materialize, that you will soon get some form of confirmation that you are indeed headed in the right direction, and that overall you are going to be okay. That has been our story in recent years and most certainly during throughout this present-day wilderness called the pandemic. When the Commonwealth essentially closed all businesses, places for worship and assembly, restaurants and sports venues, we didn't know how we were going to be able to worship remotely, we could only guess as to how we would be impacted. But we stepped out on faith, we gathered as much information and resources as we could and we found that safe option, the one that offered a smile and a gentle warm presence in the form of God's Holy Spirit.

Earlier this year we pondered if we could once again have a Memorial Hymn Sing. And we wrestled with that thought even while we were still wearing masks and still not singing within the Sanctuary! But the Spirit, responding to our faith, to our belief that we could indeed have a Hymn Sing was there with us all along the way.

The response to our service was amazing and it was because we were willing to walk by faith and not by sight during that endeavor. We trusted that God would be with us, instead of accepting what we could obviously see which was that we were small in

number, greatly limited in music resources, and hampered by social distancing requirements. But we had a great time that day, we had a wonderful service and it once again affirmed that the Spirit was with us and is still with us in this place.

We might look at some of the many areas within this church family, the building itself and the congregation as well. And if we are looking at our concerns with our eyes, at what we can actually see, it might seem overwhelming. But if we are looking at these concerns from a standpoint of faith, if we start to approach these concerns with more than what we reliably can assume as our available resources, if we call on the Spirit to walk with us, to guide us, to lead us, to encourage us, then those concerns, our future, starts to look a little more promising.

Months ago we discovered that we could no longer use the front doors of our Sanctuary. After almost 100 years, time and weathering took its toll on the doors. We received one estimate to replace the doors that simply was not realistic. But our prayers, and our continuing faith walk has brighten our picture. We received a generous donation to replace the doors, and we have lined up a door contractor who is preparing to move forward on the project, at a cost that is well within our budget.

The last few days, I attended the Annual Conference, the yearly gathering of the New England Conference, where the 500-plus UMC churches within New England gather to discuss the business of the church-at-large. There is always an issue that seems to derail the business proceedings, which then requires a fair amount of time to get us back on track. This year, it was the issue of three churches located in Maine that have voted to disaffiliate - to leave the Methodist connection.

Each of these churches embarked on a lengthy period of discernment, ranging from 8 to 24 months. Each of these churches were reacting to how the inconsistency of the Church-at-large's statements and practice on the issue of being welcoming and accepting of all of God's children impacted their congregations and their standing within their respective communities. In short, after almost 50 years of hearing that the UMC still could not agree to welcome without reservation folks from the LGBTQ community, these three congregations decided that they needed to leave the UMC in order to continue on their own chosen path to be welcoming and accepting and inclusive.

Now keep in mind that our Conference established the process for those churches or any church for that matter, to leave if they felt they needed to chart a different course serving God. And it was that issue,

the fact that these 3 churches, after following all of the rules and requirements in order to leave the UMC in good standing, it was that issue that had folks up in arms. And what drove the arguments, the passionate pleas for them to stay, for the Conference to somehow overrule the will of each of these congregations was the fact that by them leaving, they in turn would greatly damage the hopes of our Conference and other like-minded conferences of making the case that the Church-at-large, that the UMC needed to become welcoming and accepting and inclusive.

At the height of the debate, I wondered just if we as a Conference were reacting with our faith or with our own eyes. Were we willing to accept that there could be churches choosing to continue to make disciples of Jesus, albeit in a different setting, and how we could still continue to make the case that God calls us to love everyone. You see, it has been the current policy that is causing churches to leave, that is causing people to question if the UMC truly has Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.

And it is the well-versed and multi-talented delegation, a group of clergy and laity from our Conference that is charged with carrying the intention of our Conference for us to indeed be the church for all of God's children. We should have faith in how the Spirit is leading our delegation, and not fear the fact

that 3 churches, each from the Wesleyan tradition are now embarking on doing a new thing, worshiping in a new way, that enables them to be faithful and true to their calling.

Beloved, we should indeed walk by faith and not by sight. We shouldn't look at these three churches out of the over 500 churches in New England leaving our Conference as something to panic over. We should instead focus our faith on where we believe we are being led. Maybe we are at a crossroad, maybe we are now in a foreign land, and we are in need of some guidance, someone to help us find our way.

That might be the case for the church-at-large, or for us at Glendale in particular, or even for ourselves as individuals. But in every case, in every situation, consider the benefit and the blessing of walking by faith, by trusting in God, by relying on the love of Jesus, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit to see us through any and all issues and to take our brokenness and heal us to make us whole. Amen.

Please stay safe and remember, *God loves you, and so do I, and there is absolutely nothing that you can do about it!* Peace and blessings, Pastor Dave