

Today is Stewardship Dedication Sunday. As so often happens, there is more than one thing going on at a time for us to acknowledge. It is the Sunday after an election day, and a big one at that. It is the Sunday after Veterans Day. Today is also a day for us to rededicate ourselves to the work God sets before us as a congregation. I will primarily focus my words on this last concern, and the scripture helps inform us what we are all about today.

The scripture before us is a portion of the Apostle Peter's speech at Pentecost, the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' ascension. It sounds a little apocalyptic at first, a little scary- but opens up into words of promise, hope and possibility....

Hear the word of the Lord...

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'

This is the Word of the Lord.

I'll begin with a little story. Its not one you might expect.

I remember back in my college days, I was the one guy in my fraternity who went to church on Sundays (even though the worship service that was held in Colton Chapel was at 1 PM, with a brown-bag lunch already supplied.) There were a few Catholic guys who went to mass on Saturdays at 5, before other weekend festivities began. Most of my other fraternity brothers were Jewish, great guys, one and all.

That being the case, we often had those late night discussions that are so typical of people in their late teens and early 20's.

Very often those conversations broached the topic of religion, and in particular – organized religion. As it turned out, the last time the majority of guys had attended a worship service of any kind was at a family member's funeral. Going to church or synagogue was "not a thing." I was the odd one out. The conclusion of one side of the conversation has stuck with me through the years.

It was my roommate, Tom Meyers, who put it most memorably. "The church (or the synagogue) he said, is great with death, it's *life* that religion has never come to terms with."

Now as much as any late night 'bull' session can make an impact, that one has stuck with me. It is a good thing that religion knows how to deal with death, because, as they say, we all gotta go sometime... but I would argue that even more than dealing well with death, religion, and Christianity best of all, helps us embrace the lives we're given, to give us meaning and hope beyond ourselves alone. Religion is about living life well, and faithfully.

So what are we doing here, and what are we dedicating ourselves to today? One key is found in the quote on our bulletin cover today. These words were presented to us at a joint church officers meeting, two May's ago now, by the Rev. John Wimberly, a great guy & recently retired Pastor from National Capitol Presbytery. The quote is straightforward enough.

"If the only thing you're worried about your church is whether or not there will be someone here to bury you when you die, then you don't need to do a single thing.

However, if you want there to be a community of faithful followers of Jesus Christ here 100 years from now, you already need to be rethinking everything you're doing."

As a church community gathered in the name of our Lord and Savior, who was resurrected some 2,000 years ago now, we're given a mandate not just to live our lives in the way and manner of Jesus, but also to share that message and provide as best we can the resources for others to do the same, generation after generation beyond us.

We do this in three ways: We worship God together, we are here to be present to each other, and we are here to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus.

We worship God together, we are here to be present to each other, and we are here to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus.

Worshipping God is why we gather on Sundays. This is the Lord's Day, a gift to us, not solely our own- a time of Sabbath; reflection, song and prayer. This is not about us, but about God. As some of you have memorized from the old Westminster Catechism, it says that the purpose of human life is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Glorifying God is worshipping God, and we learn what it means to do that in church. (That's why the church is so much more than about funerals!) Worshipping God is about understanding, and even embodying the love God gives us in Jesus. The words we share impact us from the ground up- admitting that we are not perfect, receiving God's more than ample forgiveness, and understanding ourselves to be vessels of God's spirit in our own lives, that we can reach out and share that same love with others; whoever and wherever they might be. And in today's world, let's face it, this is pretty much the only place where you get to hear about, sing about & pray to God- publically. What we do here together is important, for ourselves and us as community.

It is the foundation of who we are, really- the beginning and the end of our lives, really, from baptismal font to that final celebration of our lives, and everything else in between.

Which leads ... to our being present to each other.

Now, as an introvert, at times I think that I can worship God perfectly well on a mountaintop- or while riding my bike, somewhere solitary, just me, myself & God. I think that this is the way that those who consider themselves 'Spiritual But Not Religious' pretty much regard religion in general. Me, myself & I - & when I want to let God in, sometimes...

Amy shared something profound in her sermon from Reformation Day a few weeks ago that relates to this. The theme of our Stewardship Campaign is Putting Second First... So, to 'Put Second First' means to put others first, to get to know who we are collectively, what we long for, how we can give of ourselves for the betterment of the whole. It is not always easy.

One very timely example; I know some of you who shed tears of sadness over the Presidential election on Tuesday. I also know some of you who shed tears of joy. Some of us are filled with anxiety, and some of us are filled with happiness. So it is. We are not monolithic, but we are one, in Christ. This is who we are as Second Presbyterian Church; a very mixed gathering of people in lots of ways, united by a common calling from and love of Jesus. Jesus loves us, this we know- all of us, now and always.

So as we continue to put others first, to be servants rather than being served, we can get to know each other, our new members and our long time members alike, and we can begin to dig deeper, understand one another a little better and begin to come closer to the church God wants to shape and form us to be, together.

Being present with one another doesn't just mean sitting in the same worship service together, either at 9, or 11, or 10. It means taking advantage of the of myriad of

opportunities of service, education, mission and outreach that you see each week in our bulletins and using that time to really begin to get to know someone else and what it's like to walk in their shoes. In this Stewardship season of Putting Second First, (citing Amy once more), we affirm that this place that we come to week after week is so much more than a routine, more than a gorgeous building, and more than a spiritual filling station. Here we are given a safe place, a comfort zone, if you will- not to hear just what it is we want to hear, but to hear a word of comfort AND challenge, of promise and the HARD Work ahead of helping to bring the love, justice and peace of God in Christ to reality.

Being present to each other also means caring for each other, in joys and disappointments, in sorrow and in celebration: ministers to one another, friends in Christ, co-workers in the coming kingdom.

As the Dalai Lama was quoted recently, selflessness and joy are intertwined. The more we are one with the rest of humanity, the better we feel. And as he quoted a 13th-century Buddhist sage, "If one lights a fire for others, it will also brighten one's own way." Being present to one another brings good and necessary light to our own lives as well as helping others.

The last item on our list, about what we're doing here; why God has put us here and now, is to live faithfully as Jesus' disciples.

This is at the same time very straightforward, but also a little tricky. We are here to 'dream God's dream', to live together in the promise that God reveals to us. (And as I'm closing in to my sixth decade, I'm coming to realize what dreaming is really all about.)

We are blessed to have incredible resources here. We'd love to be able to fulfill all our dreams at once. We have a 'to-do' list created by our Trustees that outlines the deferred maintenance on this facility that will take years and years and lots of financial resources to manage. Our Session has embarked on a set of 'top ten' lists of ways each of our councils can impact the church, our community and our world with new ideas, energy and projects.

One more thing; I have spent a lot of time since Wednesday's morning news reading about the 213 year history of this, our beloved Second Presbyterian Church. And I have come to an understanding that over the past ten years' time we are now reaching out to Baltimore and the world at large in ways never before attempted or achieved by this congregation. In comparing church bulletins, newsletters and annual reports, I've read through enough to tell me that we are truly making a meaningful difference to our community, state and world in life-changing ways. We're growing together in faith and understanding and we are learning together what the love of God in Christ means for us as individuals and as a community.

We are continually thinking critically about what we do, as church officers: faithfully monitoring our budget, prayerfully considering our programming and earnestly caring for one another.

At our best, we are following God's dreams for us; dreams that challenge us, both to be closer to each other and to reach out even more.

It is a great, great privilege for me to serve as your Pastor, to help guide this journey that God sets forth for us together. I hope that you consider it a privilege to be part of this portion of Christ's body, that together we may embody the love and the passion for all people that God in Christ give us to share. Amen.

(Included here is a prayer I would offer for us today, as well... We didn't have time for me to offer it this morning, so you may use this as our Prayers of the People, if you like...) Gracious God, You will never give up on us, you will never turn your back on us, you will never stop seeking our good, even as you continue to do everything that is good for every single one of us. So, may we not become lazy in our call to serve others, let us not use our hurt, our pain, our disappointment as excuses not to feed the hungry, to offer shelter to those who are cold, to comfort children who are bullied and jeered, to accept those who are different, to learn from those who know your heart in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Good Lord, maybe today we can look to our veterans as role models for how we might endure. People who come from different backgrounds, different nationalities, different faiths and none, different political/economic beliefs - yet willing to work and serve and support and defend each other. To have the other's back in difficult times, to stand by the side of those struggling, to share one's life fully and completely, to be willing to give one's life for everyone and each one they serve with.

We don't know have the power to heal ourselves, but you do, you do. So heal us with your grace, so we may be more gracious toward the little girl who wears a hijab and the little boy who speaks Spanish. Heal us with your hope, so we may share it with those whose lives have been so broken for so long. Heal us with your joy, so we may embrace the lonely, the broken, the overlooked. Heal us with your presence, so we may listen to those who have felt unheard for so long, so we may be the voice of those who are the most vulnerable. Heal us, heal our nation, Help us to be your people, strong in Spirit, walking together, united by you. Amen.