

Why This Matters

Scripture Reading: Acts 5: 1-11

When I was getting ready to move from Massachusetts one of my grandchildren came up close to talk. He was taking it all in. He leaned in and said, “Grandma, when you are done with this new job will you move back to your old house? The one with the train set? I said, “Yes, Elias.” Then he said, “You promise?” He had come to see in his five years of life that promises matter and if you want to be sure then you need to get to promise.

Our lives are full of promises. When we are baptized or confirmed we make promises. When we get married we make promises before God. Long before Elias or his mother, were born, I promised to serve God as a pastor and go where God sent me. Today a group of new members will join our church and we’ll all make promises. They promise to join in worship and service. We promise to welcome them as fellow disciples who share in one journey of faith.

Churches don’t run on casual commitments, but deeper ones. We share a great deal in a church. We share faith but also honest doubts. We share ideas and talents but also monetary resources. We’re the envy of many other non-profits who emulate the concept of pledging. Pledging is just a tangible sign of a deep commitment. Churches have run on commitment for 2000 years.

Our story today in Acts about the church led by Peter is the first place where we find the word “church” in the Bible. When you joined his church, you promised to eat meals together every week and then worship around the dinner tables. You promised to study scripture, to serve the poor and to share your resources. It was not a casual commitment. Yet the church grew in leaps and bounds. Why? Let’s take a closer look.

In the first place the church is a place of possibilities. For centuries, churches have been places where we experience God’s kingdom on earth. 2000 years ago people observed a rigid caste system. Greeks and Romans hated each other and competed for power. These empires shredded the small Jewish homeland and trampled on its land with disdain. To survive, the Jews rejected others, calling them Gentiles. People feared running out of food and those who were starving sold themselves into servitude. Poor people could be so hungry they sold themselves for food and became slaves; then they had to wait on people but at least they ate. Women’s only power was borrowed from the men in their lives. Women abandoned by husbands who wondered were destitute.

Nowhere were these fault lines of caste clearer than at meals. The churches started in Palestine by Peter and Paul practiced radical equality. Following Christ’s example, they respected one another as children of God. Then they sat down together – slaves and women did not serve the meals; they sat. Jews did not avoid Gentiles; they dipped their hands into the same bowls of hummus. Once you became baptized into these churches all the former distinction fell away like old shedded skin. You put on the clothing of Christ and there were no longer Jewish believers and Greek ones, no longer slave Christians and free ones, no longer male or female disciples. But in the churches people became blind to these old differentiations. Peter set the bar pretty high and it still a challenge.

Here in the Fox Valley, we strive to be true to these aspirations as the Church of the Open Door. On committees and in conversation I hear people weighing our deeds all week long against this vision of the Open Door. Like Peter, we strive to create a place where we reject the things that separate people in our world. We strive to respect and invite people of all economic backgrounds, all classes, every ability, and all races. We welcome people from every faith background. We welcome people of every sexual orientation. We don't welcome them as some churches do, as sinners who need to change. We remember that when God gazed upon all creation the first words God uttered were This is good, very good. With those words in mind, we don't presume to judge others, but see newcomers as gifts and try to create a community of faith where we all thrive because we all belong.

Our church tries to follow Christ's example in other ways. The churches of Peter and Paul were known for the way that they supported the poor, provided food and clothing each week, welcomed the homeless, healed the sick. The early churches were not castles of privilege that pulled up the moat on those who fell victim to life's misfortune, but places where people looked out with compassion. We connected with Back Bay Mission in Biloxi and developed Mission Trip for Adults annually, so people can put faith in action. We have adopted a village in Kenya and sponsor scholarships for 100 students, proving youth with a bridge to a new future through education. We birthed the Samaritan Counselling Center in our building and named them for a story in Luke's gospel They outgrew our space and have continued to serve in the valley guiding people struggling with family issues, people facing trauma or depression and helping those troubled with mental illness to find hope. We founded Esther and supported Leaven. This week, as they do every month our youth go to Pillars, a homeless shelter; they are playing games, forming friendships, and sharing human connections with homeless kids and their parents.

First Congregational Church is a true place of possibilities. When we join this congregation, or just gather on Sundays we are dreamers. Together, we imagine what the world could be if we pledge to live in light of Christ's teachings and example.

Finally, our world needs churches like this. You never joined one of Peter or Paul's churches to meet the right people though people of all classes would gather. You never gravitated to a Christian church to make connections but often you found your life was changed. It was not easy to belong to a church 2000 years ago because the Jews started hunting church members, and the Romans started to persecute them. Yet these churches thrived. Why? People joined churches then because they were searching for something they couldn't find anywhere else.

It used to be people joined churches to meet the right folks, but religion is changing in our land. By 2070 if current trends continue, Christians will be only half the population over-shadowed by the unaffiliated. We come to church because we find something here you can't get on a search engine.

Our new members are driving 30 – 40 miles every week. They have left churches that proved to be irrelevant or spiritually abusive, churches defined by who they exclude not an open door. Many of these people kept searching until they found a progressive church. Here in this place, they sensed God's call.

When you find a place like this with a true commitment to outreach and people committed to live our faith our loud, we all need to make a commitment. We have eleven people joining today and an equal number joining in January. We owe it to ourselves to resolve to support this church today so

that it can continue to realize its true potential. In our story Ananias and Sapphira did not fulfill their promise to support the church and the story says they fell down dead. I believe the Bible does not have to be literal to be true, and so I think something died in them that day when they hedged their bets, when they held back, when they short-changed their faith. Something died in us when we don't do what we could with what we've been given. We give to our church because we have a chance to make such a difference in our own lives and in the life of the world.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, November 13, 2022 at 9:30 AM